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August, 1928
Vol. LIX No. 2

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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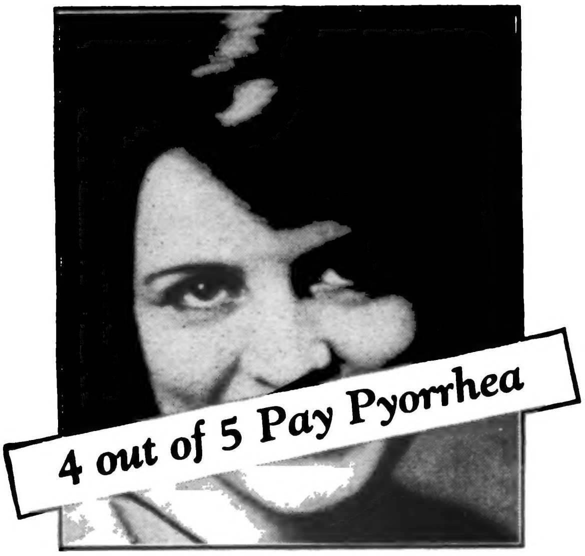

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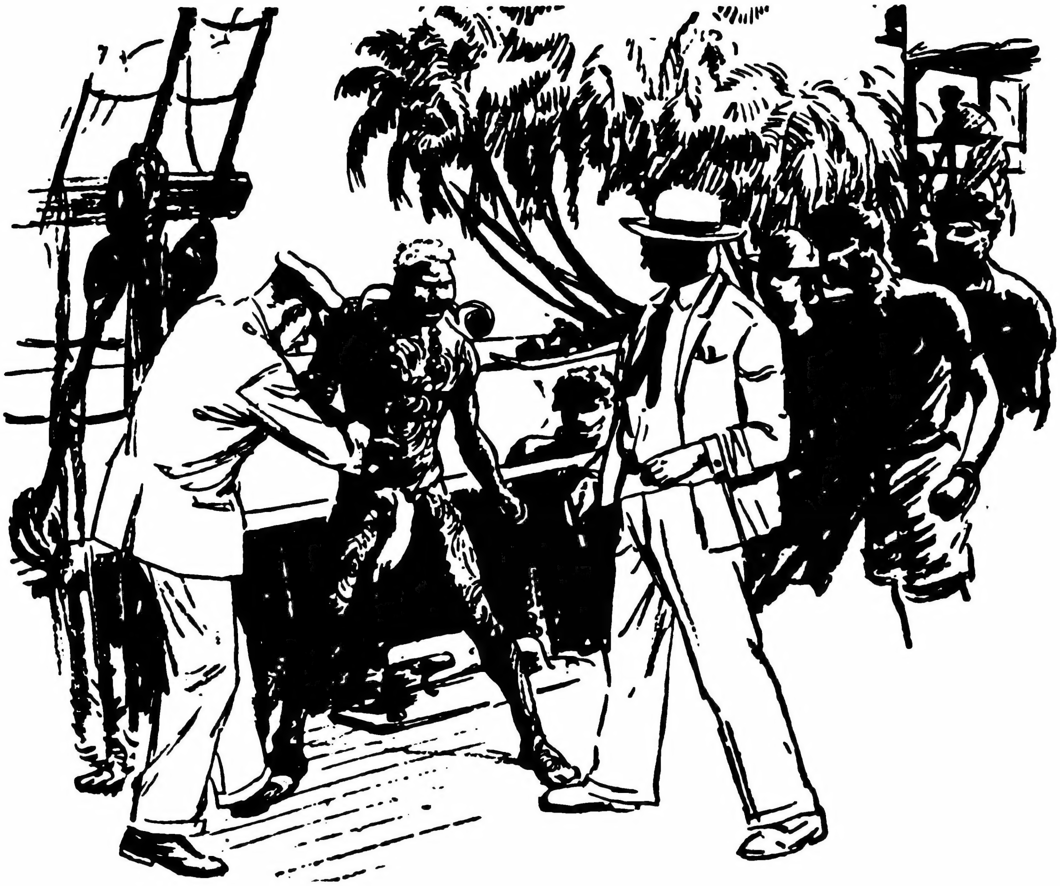


A THIEF of TINIAN TIME

The Tale of a Little Brown Brother

By BASSET MORGAN

"OF ALL the brass-hinged, copper-riveted, name-blown-in-the-bottle missing links!" The ship's doctor shook his head and added, speaking of the latest candidate for the crew, "There's murderer in his eyes, inherent and cultivated. Binkley, lad, pitch him off and let's get on with the rat-killin'."

The *Restructor*, lying off Guam, was taking on an auxiliary crew of natives for the task of repairing deep sea cable off the Tinians. At her gangway the doctor and second officer Binkley inspected the brown men who came from shore and sent aft those chosen. The inspection had been interrupted by a sudden commotion and through the group darted a weirdly unprepossessing human creature who swung one arm aloft, then saluted by touching his right thumb to his left ear and wriggling his fingers.

Officer Binkley's laughter startled the gulls. He stared at the fellow. From under a mat of lime-bleached hair and tufted yellow eyebrows, sharp bright eyes peered at the young second mate from a face like black crape. Blue whorls of intricate design were tattooed from ankles to forehead. He wore a red loinrag, a necklace of small clock wheels and the mainsprings of a defunct timepiece dangled from each ear lobe.

Binkley swung him in front of the doctor and laughed over his shoulder. The black, who had been observing the medical examination, rolled his eyes until only the white was visible. He thrust out a thin and quivering tongue to an alarming length, then at the jab of the wooden palate knife jerked away and his hand dropped to a knife haft in his breechclout. Officer Binkley promptly seized the knife and tossed it over the side of the ship.

"This way out," he snapped, whirling the black man and shoving him toward the gangway. The selection of the native crew went forward until their quota was complete, but they saw no more of the ebon-skinned collector of clock-wheel necklaces that afternoon.

That night the *Restructor* sailed on a path of moon-silver, leaving the twinkling yellow lights of Guam on the southern horizon. On deck, young Binkley listened to wailing tenor voices of the native crew lifted in melody threaded by the tinkle of a steel guitar, and reluctantly left the beauty of low-burning stars reflected in spattered silver on the sea, to go below. Pajama-clad, in his berth, he wound his watch and a small desk clock that had been given him with "best wishes and love" by a girl in Honolulu. It was a pretty clock with a bronze Cupid supporting the timepiece, and young Binkley hoped the girl had designedly chosen that suggestive godlet which might be interpreted as Time borne up by Love, or some such tender interpretation because she was a nice girl.

With a sigh for the months which must elapse before he would see her again, Binkley turned in. He was almost asleep when the *slur-r* of brass curtain rings on the door rod roused him, and he saw the door curtains stirred by something beside the vibrating throb of the *Restructor's* engines. There came another sound, curiously resembling the clicking of a beetle blundering along the bulkhead.

"*Tiki-tiki*," it chattered; and again, "*tiki-tiki*."

Wide awake, Binkley touched the electric switch. As light leaped from a bulb over his desk he looked for a beetle but saw nothing except a tremor of the curtains as if swayed by a gentle breeze. Yet he was conscious of something missing from the casual sounds to which he was accustomed in his berth; something he could not locate until he looked at the desk. Then, he stared. The Cupid clock, which he had wound not a half hour before, was gone. Someone had taken it. Binkley's bare feet hit the floor with a thud. His first impulse was to pursue the thief, then he decided to wait until morning. He valued the clock as her gift but he was the "kid" officer and realized the ragging he would get for prowling after eight bells searching for an unseamanlike Cupid timepiece.

In the morning he spoke of his loss to the first officer, Williamson, who was also in charge of the cable repair work.

"None of the regular crew would take it," he said, "and what puzzles me was that '*tiki-tiki*' sound like a human voice."

"It'll turn up," Williamson assured him and the matter was dropped until next day when the chief engineer complained at breakfast that his alarm clock had been taken from its shelf. Then young Binkley spoke of the missing Cupid clock.

"Did you see or hear anything, Chief?" he asked.

"Nothing connected with the clock, but as I went below for the night I thought I saw a ball of waste along the passageway and when I kicked at it, the thing vanished."

"Somebody aboard has an appetite for clocks," commented Williamson, then he and Binkley went on deck.

THAT morning was a busy one in prospect. Orders were given to examine the thousand-mile coils of cable in great tanks amidships, lying under water to protect its gutta-percha covering from air-deterioration. Binkley, with two seamen, went to the tanks and the lights were switched on. Incandescent bulbs in wire cages circled the rim of the cable tanks and their glow shone through the wooden grating of the hatch. One of the men lifting the heavy grating stared a moment, then beckoned Binkley nearer.

On the upper coils of cable, clear of water, huddled a black man, arms wrapped about his knees, prehensile toes gripping the cable. His bleached mat of yellow hair lifted. Betel-stained thick lips parted to show the fanged grin of the native whom Binkley had dismissed on Guam. Beside him, on the cable, lay the nickel case of an alarm clock and the remnants of the dismembered Cupid trinket. The necklace of clock wheels on the man's chest was longer and now reached to the second whorl of blue tatooing and supported the little bronze Cupid of Binkley's gift from the girl in Honolulu.

"The thieving son of gun!" yelped Binkley. "Get t'hell up here out of that! Stowed away, by heck, and we're bound to carry him along to the Tinians."

His comments crackled. At his command, the men reached down, but the black man's legs twisted about the cable coils in a tenacious grip which defied their efforts to dislodge him, especially as his head darted forward turtle fashion and his teeth met with a click in the pant-leg of one seaman who barely snatched his leg from a flesh hold.

"Get my gun and turn on the valves," snapped Binkley. He waited with patience until a service revolver was in his hand and the rush of water in the tanks reached the black's armpits. They seized the culprit as he tried to scramble out and Binkley explained to Williamson about his high-handed effort to remain on board with the native crew.

"I thought he went ashore. Now I understand that '*tiki-tiki*' I heard when my clock disappeared in the night. And it was his bleached topknot the chief saw in the passageway when his alarm clock went. Wanted clock wheels and my Cupid for his necklace."

"Send him forward with the natives," said Williamson. "We'll put him to work. Good name for him—Tiki-tiki," he added.

When he heard of the mild punishment for the stowaway, the doctor snorted his disdain.

"On general principles and as a measure of precaution you'd do well to drop him overboard," he prescribed. "Looks like a Solomon Islander and I've had reason to know they've just enough intelligence to make them dangerous."

As Binkley tried to explain to the black that he must bunk with the natives and work his passage, there came into the fiery belligerence of the man's eyes a look of bewilderment pitiful enough in its perplexity to soften the jaw line of the young second mate.

"You can train a dog," he said to the doctor. "And since it's my fault he wasn't pitched off at Guam, I'm responsible. But it's no good riling these black devils. Maybe decent treatment . . ."

THE cable work engrossed him and he thought little more about the stowaway until a few days later when the quartermaster reported that Tiki-tiki, instead of bunking with the natives, continued to roost on the cables in the tanks.

For the black man there was possibly a homelike security in the Stygian darkness and moist heat of the tanks not unlike the steaming jungle nests of the Solomons. Sometimes when the lights were on, it resembled perhaps the fireflies imprisoned in bird nests. Binkley, who had accepted responsibility for the stowaway, was satisfied to let him roost there out of harm's way until a day or so later when the fourth mate complained of the loss of his alarm clock.

"That black should be in irons," he protested. "I don't care if my clock wasn't worth a tinker's dam. He thieved it and he should be punished."

"What's the use of howling now?" observed Binkley. "We could never sort out your wheels from the chief's and mine. Clock insides, like babies, all look alike."

"And, by golly, his wheel necklace is several degrees longer. Yesterday your Cupid ornamented his chest. Now it's a knot or so south. Why let the beast get away with his crimes?"

"Well, you admit he's dangerous and I have an idea he has a memory like an elephant's for the small boy who feeds him pepper pills instead of candy. And I like rambling ashore. I'd hate to feel that for the sake of a clock wrangle, I might be a target for Tiki-tiki's vengeance on some fine night when there's a swell moon and a girl in the offing. Now that the clocks are wrecked, I prefer to let Tiki-tiki depart in peace with no rash resentment under his lime-bleached wool. We'll dump him on one of the Tinians. What's a clock more or less? Lord, doesn't time drag enough without keeping personal track of it?"

Binkley speared a roll and buttered it.

"Any of you with heart-to-heart affection for timepieces had better park them where Tiki-tiki won't find them," he added with a slight smile.

"I don't want the vermin in my quarters," flung the third mate as he departed to fetch a clock which had ceased to function and requested Binkley to present it to Tiki-tiki to avoid a visit from the clock-wheel addict. Binkley made an elaborate and humorous ceremony of giving the third mate's clock to Tiki-tiki who saluted as on the first day, with a thumb at his ear, then dropped and bumped his forehead on deck at Binkley's feet.

"It's perfectly evident he's been contaminated by white influence," said Binkley. "Somebody taught him that salute, and God knows what beside. I feel safer treating him humanly. A twisted sense of white man's humor can raise hell in a black man's brain and Tiki-tiki shows that some darn white fool or other has monkeyed with him."

That day the necklace of clock wheels made a double turn about Tiki-tiki's neck. That night, lying in his berth, the doctor noticed something twisting the empty legs of his trousers hung on a bulkhead peg with his watch chain dangling from the pocket. The ship was roused by a revolver shot, but investigation showed Tiki-tiki curled on the cable in the tank. The avid greed of the black man for clock wheels ceased to be humorous, and from that time on, watches and keepsakes valued by their owners were locked in the captain's safe.

"We've seldom needed to treat men brutally," said the elderly skipper, "and in this blistering weather it is inhuman to put a man in irons. If it was promiscuous ordinary thieving, I might. But it's just this fellow's childlike love of personal adornment."

With no more clocks available, Tiki-tiki settled down to a life of monotonous serenity in the cable tank, emerging only for chow and an occasional obeisance to Binkley for whom he exhibited mute signs of doglike devotion ever since the young officer presented him with the third mate's clock. His necklace of wheels hung to the equatorial line of his G-string, a jangling adornment on the black skin. Clusters of main and secondary springs danced beside his cheeks and a raw rim of lacerated flesh showed that he had enlarged the apertures in his ear lobes for their gradually increasing bulk.

The *Restructor's* wireless, giving brief news of ports, was the only distraction in routine except the affairs of Tiki-tiki, until they reached the vicinity of the Tinians and began to drag for the interrupted cable. Then the main deck became a scene of activity. Great hooks hung from sheaves inset in the *Restructor's* bow where her fine clipper lines had been snubbed in converting her to a cable repair shop. Back and forth they steamed, dragging the hooks, with Williamson watching the dynamometer which registers the weight pull on the lines. Sometimes the needle mounted and the hooks were hauled up, but until the third day they came with empty claws except for snarls of seaweed clustered with winking slugs and gaping barnacles. But that night the cable was caught fast in the great hook jaws.

Daylight silence on the tropic sea was broken by panting donkey engines and the *Restructor's* bows sank deeper under the weight of cable until her stern lifted and the propeller blades dripped above the surface. The sea split east and west as the cable emerged, a grim, dragonlike length, scaled thickly with sea growth, bearded with weed, moving with uprooted crawling life of the deep. The boats were lowered. The big red buoys were dropped and fastened to the line.

Usually, this was the time when the native crew proved most valuable, diving in the sea, romping through the work of scraping sea growth from the cable. But there were menacing shadows about the ship and sudden gleams of light as sharks turned belly up, their fins streaking along the ripples. The native crew, Tiki-tiki included, were ordered to keep in the boats, and the work went slowly in spite of Williamson's desire to make record time for the company whose loss on the interrupted commercial line was upwards of ten thousand dollars a day in addition to the repair expense.

AFTER sundown, the crew tossed tin cans to the sea ghouls and speculated profanely on the marvelous digestion of sharks. Binkley, to give zest to the fun, sent for dynamite, and there was considerable cheering and sport after the sea convulsion of the explosive, when sharks floated, white side up. The natives clustered as close as they dared. The bleached yellow of Tiki-tiki's head was along the rail very near Binkley and his sharp, bright eyes watched every movement of the officer attaching fuse caps and lowering the innocent appearing charge into the sea where a small box in the young mate's hand seemed to upheave the near-by ocean.

This business of making death was more

fascinating than gathering clock wheels for his necklace. Tiki-tiki stared as that box in Binkley's hand jerked a far-out commotion of water and floated dead sharks for the ravening jaws of their tribe. Tiki-tiki slipped like a shadow after the seaman who carried the unused dynamite sticks and battery below.

The seaman had been ordered to return the explosive and fetch Binkley the storeroom keys, and when he did not return, the mate went down. He found the seaman unconscious from a wound on the head for which he could offer no explanation. There was a marlinspike in the half-opened doorway of the storeroom, and, from motives of prudence, Binkley did not report the affair as a possible attempt of some native with a grudge to set off the dynamite carried down. He was thankful enough there was no serious accident, and the assault victim was satisfied to escape a couple of days' strenuous work because of his swelled cranium.

Next day the cable work went forward with a rush. The cleaned line was cut, a new length spliced in and paid out, the loose end again dragged for and secured. The line was joined and tested.

In one of the boats lying alongside the cable, Tiki-tiki busied himself tearing barnacle beaks from the shells to devour the contents. When the order came to clear away, he was too intent on barnacle meat to observe his shipmates, and, not understanding the command, was still clutching the cable when the word came to cut loose.

There was a gurgle of swirling eddies and a moment later the body of a little black man floated above the sinking line, with two boats pulling frantically to the rescue. They gathered Tiki-tiki in and brought him aboard ship, waterlogged and dazed, and presently uttering guttural screams as his hands clutched at his naked breast pathetically. The necklace of clock wheels was gone! Some shell projection on the cable had caught the necklace and it sank with the cable.

The frenzy of Tiki-tiki was pitiful. He flopped before young Binkley and banged his forehead on deck, beseeching with unmistakable meaning, for the officer to lift the cable and recover his treasure. Binkley could not laugh. His useless explanation sputtered and died. Watching the pantomimic grief of the black, Williamson hid his own amused tolerance in a curt command to put Tiki-tiki ashore. And to soften that sentence of exile, young Binkley sorted what he could spare from his wardrobe and accumulated trinkets in his lockers and presented to Tiki-tiki a bundle of outworn garments, typewriter spools, picture postcards and neckties. Thus the young officer attempted to illustrate a definite farewell.

Tiki-tiki understood. He dived below and came up again carrying the bundle from Binkley's room. On deck they watched the boat carrying him shoreward and his immediate disappearance in the thick, green, luxuriant, tropic jungle.

"That's that," Binkley sighed with relief to Williamson.

"We'd better take the doctor's advice about the next missing link who attempts to board ship," said Williamson. "Now I can wear my watch again."

As the *Restructor* steamed away for Guam, her crew saw Tiki-tiki on shore, but he did not respond to their shouts of farewell.

THE elation of officers and crew was ended when they reached Guam and found that within an hour of mooring, the line they had just repaired off the Tinians was again out of commission. It meant an immediate return and young Binkley looked thoughtful.

"It smells like Tiki-tiki," he observed to Williamson when the ship was headed north.

"It looks like Tiki-tiki," replied Williamson when some days later the *Restructor* began dragging for the cable and a native canoe had put out from shore of the green island lying on the east. They were further puzzled by sight of the purple sea dotted with dead fish and drifting weed.

"Wind and tide would have cleared those sharks and fish we killed when we were here before," commented Williamson. "And without a doubt that's Tiki-tiki in the *proa*. He looks a bit lonely. Perhaps the Tinians didn't fraternize. But he doesn't come aboard this ship. No, sir. Don't forget!"

Tiki-tiki did not attempt to approach the *Restructor*. All day his *proa* cruised around as he watched the cable dragging operation, and when it was lifted they saw his small craft at the far end of the emerging line where he seemed to be searching it, peering into the depths near by, then patiently paddling around until the repair on the cable was finished and the *Restructor* gone.

"Poor devil! He wants his clock-wheel necklace," said Binkley. He remained sympathetic over Tiki-tiki until they were halfway to Guam when a wireless message announced the line again obstructed off the Tinians.

"Hell's bells!" snarled Binkley. "At this rate we'll never get to Honolulu. There's something wrong at the Tinians."

There was. A sorrowful black man had lost his treasure of a clock-wheel necklace and a bronze Cupid pendant of which he had made himself a new god!

Returning in a calm which held grave foreboding of troubled weather brewing, the *Restructor's* crew saw on the sea, shadowed by evening and reflected stars, the flecks of dead fish and deep sea débris. The flower-perfumed offshore wind was tainted with the stench. Gulls feasted high. The sea was ruffled by that swirl which inevitably follows the knife fluting of shark fins.

"Dead fish by hundreds," commented Binkley. "Dynamite!"

When after days of dragging and hooking the line, they discovered the newly spliced length was flattened and frayed, Binkley's suspicion was strengthened. He kept his own counsel because he felt that more than anyone on board, he was to blame.

"I wish we had some spare clocks," he muttered. "Hereafter I shall carry a few extra tickers, though there will probably never be another Tiki-tiki."

"Oh, I don't give the fellow credit for brains enough to cause this trouble," said Williamson. "He couldn't dive deep enough or stay down long enough to rip that cable skin."

"But what killed all the fish?" argued Binkley.

"Can't tell. Probably some disease. Maybe the Tinianders had a big fish hunt with a few tons of hemp or hashish or whatever it is they use."

Nevertheless Binkley set out in a boat to follow the *proa* and obtain an interview with Tiki-tiki. But the *proa* reached shore and the black man dived into the jungle and vanished, as elusive as moon-silver sprayed between quivering palm sabers on the coral beach.

After that repair the *Restructor* reached Guam with every man of her company holding his breath for fear the Tinian trouble would tear loose again. Binkley was ashore and in the company's office sending a message to the girl in Honolulu when it came. The manager came from his inner sanctum with a furrowed brow and an ominous glare in his eyes.

"Don't say it," growled Binkley. "I know—the line off the Tinians!"

"And this company is losing——" began the manager.

"I know! Thousands, literally thousands, daily. And I'm losing my youth and Williamson his hair, and the skipper has jaundice. But it isn't our fault. We've made good time on every repair. What you should do is send a company of Marines down to clean out the Tinians. If you'd seen the dead fish, and smelled 'em! We thought the natives poisoned——"

"Don't be a chuckleheaded fool," suggested the manager. "Last time Williamson talked about fish and dynamite. Nobody has it at the Tinians."

"Got any clocks?" Binkley wanted to know. His gaze avoided the manager in favor of cigaret smoke curling from his fingers.

With a look of belligerent hate, the manager went to make out the *Restructor's* sailing orders and Binkley left the office to investigate the resources of Guam in regard to ancient timepieces of any description. They proved exceedingly limited. Small sons of Naval exiles and the elements had quickly eliminated any clocks not in active use marking time. The Navy stores had alarm clocks, and from his own pocket Binkley paid for a half dozen bright, loud-ticking alarm clocks and started for the ship when he suddenly recalled the Cupid pendant of the clock-wheel necklace of Tiki-tiki's tatooed torso. Turning back to the stores he demanded Cupids. However, there seemed a dearth on Guam of little gods of love. He found dolls, Kewpies, Teddybears, busts of Lincoln and Roosevelt and numerous winding toys. Binkley dickered for a Kewpie, a head of Roosevelt and a Teddybear and had them wrapped with the clocks.

"When they get this bill for cable-repair supplies, the company is going to look cockeyed at the items," he mused. "But so long as Tiki-tiki mourns, they lose thousands of perfectly good dollars a day. Here's wishing myself luck enough to be a messenger of good cheer before there is too much silver amid the gold tresses of this present generation of nice American girls."

ABOARD the *Restructor,* Binkley found short temper and gloom. He kept his own counsel and stowed his purchases in his own berth. In due time the now familiar shores of the Tinians hove into view and as before Tiki-tiki and his *proa* cruised in the vicinity of the ship.

"That black devil . . ." began Williamson and added unbridled utterances.

"Before we return, I crave leave to go ashore and interview Tiki-tiki, sir," said Binkley. "Plenty long leave."

"He'll probably knife you or blow you full of poison darts, and we'll have more red tape and bother and delay," retorted his superior officer.

"I'll risk it. I've brought a half dozen clocks. I hope the skipper won't fuss about the bill I'll present for them. There's some other trifles also, but they'll be cheap at the price, if my scheme works. You see, I was halfway responsible for Tiki-tiki. Besides the job of repairing cable every few minutes is getting monotonous. It's such a waste of time patching the same line over and over. I'm getting old, wet-nursing this damned Tinian cable. Time—time and clocks, have got my goat."

"Go try your luck," suggested Williamson.

Binkley set out in the ship's dingey, a revolver in his pocket, the bundle of clocks and toys in the boat stern. But Tiki-tiki paddled just out of reach until Binkley ripped open the paper bundle wrappings and displayed the shining clocks. Tiki-tiki's paddle rested on the water and he watched alertly.

Binkley pulled ashore where he set up an array of clocks grouped about a Teddy-bear, a Kewpie and a small brass head of Roosevelt. On the *Restructor's* bridge, with a glass at his eye, Williamson watched the *proa* touch shore and saw Tiki-tiki cautiously approach the clocks, his thin tongue licking his betel-stained lips. Binkley gesticulated copiously and appeared to be talking considerably. The parley lasted almost an hour, but for some reason Tiki-tiki resisted the lure, and Binkley gathered his treasures, bundled them into the boat and pulled for the ship.

"He's got dynamite and a battery, sure as God made little fishes," he announced. "I tried to make him disgorge, but he has it hid of course. I spent all the time—*time!*" he yelled. "Look at the time I've wasted. Six timepieces. Ye gods, I wish I'd spent some time aboard teaching Tiki-tiki to savvy our lingo!"

The cable dragging went on and when the line came out of the sea, Tiki-tiki and his *proa* were alongside, scrutinizing the cable for a missing necklace and Cupid pendant.

That night Williamson and Binkley conferred at the rail, their gaze on a blot of shadow on the crushed coral beach where Tiki-tiki's canoe rested high and dry, and Williamson was persuaded to agree with young Binkley's strategic plan to disarm the black man. Youth and the adventurous lure of the affair argued for the boy in his mad scheme for outwitting the native, when the logical course would lead them to report the sinner and let the Naval authorities at Guam handle his case. But the captain was under the doctor's care with jaundice, and Williamson reluctantly gave his permission.

THE line was repaired and tested. At dusk, the *Restructor* steamed slowly south until she lay behind the furthest purple blot of islands against a star-sprinkled sky. Then a boat put out and was pulled close to Tiki-tiki's island and Binkley left it and plunged into fringing lianas of the shore jungle. He made his way almost to the beach where he had tried to tempt Tiki-tiki and lay hidden, watching until a *proa* was launched and floated over the sea, then headed along shore where its occupant searched for and found what Binkley made out to be a line fastened to a slender palm tree and dropping into the water.

Lifting the dripping line hand over hand, Tiki-tiki shoved the *proa* seaward. Then he took some object from the canoe and fastened it to a second line in his hand, slipping it up and down the cord fastened to the shore palm as if to make sure it slipped readily.

In his hiding place, Binkley took a deep breath. There was no doubt remaining in his mind. Tiki-tiki was biting the edge of a percussion cap on a fuse depending from a stick of dynamite which he had secured by slip nooses to a shore line connected with the cable.

On one of those times the cable had been lifted, the black man had fastened a knot of tough *bijucca,* then paid it off under water to the palm tree on shore. At any time he could thread the explosive and touch it off—as now.

Binkley's cry was muffled by a dull *boom!* which echoed in the channels between the islands, and was followed by a spurting fountain of sea water.

The *proa,* dancing on the ensuing disturbance of the sea, shot shoreward, was pulled high, and Tiki-tiki trotted leisurely to the jungle to await the return of the *Restructor,* when the cable would be lifted and perhaps bring up his necklace.

Creeping cautiously nearer, Binkley lay listening. He understood that Tiki-tiki had watched the dynamiting of sharks and had stolen the explosive and battery from the storeroom where in the ample supply it was not missed. He had carried it ashore in the bundle of Binkley's discarded clothing which he disdained to wear. When the cable sank on that first repair, with his necklace, the simple reasoning of the black man suggested this way to fetch about the return of the *Restructor,* the lifting of the cable and possible discovery of his string of clock wheels and Cupid god.

Creeping soundlessly, Binkley finally had a glimpse of the lime-bleached head of Tiki-tiki on a sleeping mat of his old trousers, atop a small earth mound. He waited a long time until the black man's breathing sounded like sleep, then crept nearer, guided by the head like a yellow puffball in the starlight. His revolver was in his hand. He did not mean to kill Tiki-tiki but it was imperative he secure whatever dynamite was left.

With his hair prickling his scalp he got to his feet, then lunged forward at the sleeping black, the revolver nose thrust against a gutturally growling throat. Tiki-tiki's body stiffened like a steel bow. In spite of the cold touch of the gun, he fought like a tiger and Binkley was no match for the apelike length and strength of the black man's arms. His revolver crashed on a woolly head whose thick mat of hair deadened the blow. Tiki-tiki had him in a viselike grip, pinioning his arms to his sides as Binkley's fingers jerked the gun to full cock.

He realized now that he was fighting for life. Tiki-tiki's fingers were on his throat, pressing his windpipe, shutting off his breath. White man and black rolled over and over as Binkley felt the clutch of gripping talons tightening, and heard his own breath sobbing in violent, convulsive gasps.

His strength was going. Red lights danced before his eyes. Vainly he tried to twist his arm and bring the revolver against the skull or body of the black. To save himself, he must kill! His fingers coiled on the trigger.

Then an agony stabbed his arm as the teeth of Tiki-tiki met in the flesh of his shoulder. There was the crash of a shot as his fingers contracted with pain, a still more terrific *boom-m!* as the earth lifted and cocoa palms swayed and slithered to the coral. Then, releasing their grim clutches in that catalclysmic upheaval, black man and white rolled to the harsh white sand and lay quite still, the body of Tiki-tiki across young Binkley, their heads almost touching.

ON THE sea the *Restructor's* boat was pulled in frantic haste to where black dust coiled under the stars and coral grit rained on the shore, and a great hole gaped where Binkley's shot had exploded Tiki-tiki's hidden store of dynamite.

At the shock of sea water sluiced over his head, Binkley opened his eyes. The spot of radiance from Williamson's pocket-flash moved from his face and shone on Tiki-tiki whose beady eyes blinked as he sat on his haunches, hands tied behind his back and guarded by two of the *Restructor's* crew.

"How's Tiki-tiki?" began young Binkley, groggily.

"T'hell with Tiki-tiki," snarled Williamson. "I'm worrying over you. We heard the crash just as I had decided to fetch you anyway, whether you found what you wanted or not."

"My gun went off and exploded his reserve dynamite," said Binkley. "Got the clocks along, sir?"

"Never mind the clocks, you young idiot."

But Binkley insisted, and explained: "I promised he'd get them if he showed me how he wrecked the cable, sir. We've spent a lot more time in worse ways. A few more minutes certainly wouldn't cut any ice."

They fetched the parcel from his boat and broached it between Binkley and Tiki-tiki. Binkley stood, with Williamson's arm supporting him, on shaking legs, but he managed to smile in that rose-flushed light of dawn.

"Time, Tiki-tiki, was all that saved me in that round with you. And here's plenty of time, clocks till you can't rest. And gods! Good luck, Tiki-tiki. And farewell."

He turned away as the black man bumped his head on the lacerating coral. And as they pulled for the ship he saw Tiki-tiki holding each alarm clock in turn to his ear, entranced by its cheerful engine noise. Then Tiki-tiki listened earnestly to the head of Roosevelt, and after heaving up a mound of coral sand, he placed it on top and groveled on his face.

"As something to worship," muttered young Binkley, "that head of Roosevelt goes bigger with Tiki-tiki than Cupid. But not with me. We're a long way from Honolulu."

"I'll bet it was because that head of Roosevelt didn't make a noise that Tiki-tiki chose it for a god!" mused Williamson.

THE PARACHUTE RACKET

By SAMUEL TAYLOR MOORE

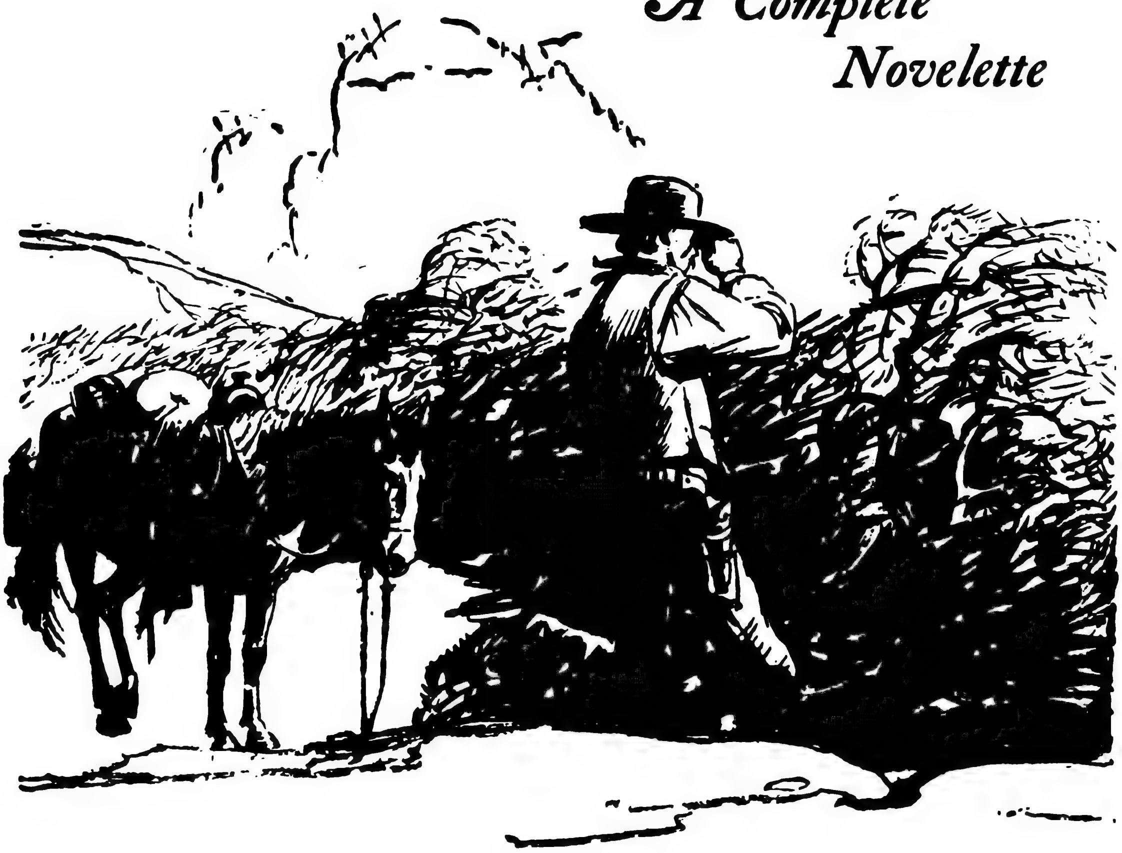
THE originator of the spectacle of parachute jumping, once so familiar a feature of every country fair and circus, was lovable old Uncle Tom Baldwin, an American and a weird combination of showman and scientist.

Tom was a daring, inventive kid and he built his first parachute and balloon in the days when John Wise was popularizing ballooning in America. One day a master rogue, by name Kid Troy, happened along. In the spectacular stunt of Tom Baldwin the old crook saw an opportunity to increase his prosperity. He first signed on the boy at a good salary. Then he assembled about him an organization of expert burglars and pickpockets from the slums of the big cities.

An advance man of Kid Troy's gang would appear in a mid-Western community, posting bills announcing the great and unprecedented spectacle of a parachute jump, free-gratis, for nothing. Meanwhile the agent noted the most prosperous appearing homes in the village. Then came the day of the great free thrill. Everyone but the bedridden would flock to where the balloon was being inflated. The ascent was delayed always some time beyond the announced hour. While the fascinated townsfolk watched the bag take shape, Kid Troy's confederates were leisurely ransacking the deserted homes, picking and choosing their loot as meticulously as a prima donna selecting a necklace.

And Kid Troy passed up no bets. At an appropriate moment the old rascal would address the multitude, warning them that thieves and pickpockets had attached themselves to his irreproachable scientific spectacle. Immediately those with watches and bank rolls would pat their possessions reassuringly, and that automatic gesture was the tip-off to the observant, slim fingered confederates just where they should "dip" during the exciting preliminaries of the ascension. In those days the telephone was a dream, the telegraph little more, newspapers slow, and advance warnings, therefore, out of the question. Tom used to chuckle over those early adventures and he admitted he never returned to the place of ascension. He rolled up his parachute where he landed and pressed on to the next town.

Later he established himself under honest auspices. Imitators followed. Truly, the country fair grounds of America were the birthplace of the aerial life-preserver, the parachute.



CHAPTER I

THE GREEN CURTAIN

IT WAS ten o'clock in the forenoon. United States Marshal Joe Tybee was raging up and down his office, saying things that were forceful enough, but certainly not elegant. As he chewed savagely on a dead cigar, he muttered under his breath:

"Fine layout! Give me half of the universe and all of hell, for a district, and allow me about as many deputies as a country constable has in a hog-stealing case. Got away, of course. If the police in Fort Smith were worth a damn, they'd have picked the whole outfit up. But, no! They let all the bad ones escape to the Cities of Refuge, and then it's a job for marshals. I'll be——"

The door opened, and a young man stepped into the office, interrupting the marshal.

"Good morning, Uncle Joe!" greeted the visitor.

"Good morning," growled Joe Tybee.

The visitor was just under six feet and had the build of a real man. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he did have a good, usable, trustworthy face, a pair of clear gray eyes, with a smile in them, and an abundant thatch of hair that had wanted to be red, but gave it up and turned brown. Breck Cahill was twenty-four and the only son of Marshal Tybee's favorite sister. The boy had grown up in Kentucky. His ancestors had been with Boone and his compatriots. Stories of adventure had come down to the boy, as family traditions, that fired him with zeal for frontier life. From his childhood he had handled firearms, and had learned to use them skilfully. He had often sighed that the frontier his ancestors knew, was gone. Never could he match his wits and skill against wild men. Breck had been at Fort Smith, Arkansas, a month, visiting this favorite uncle. He had begged to go with some posse on an excursion, but Tybee had said:

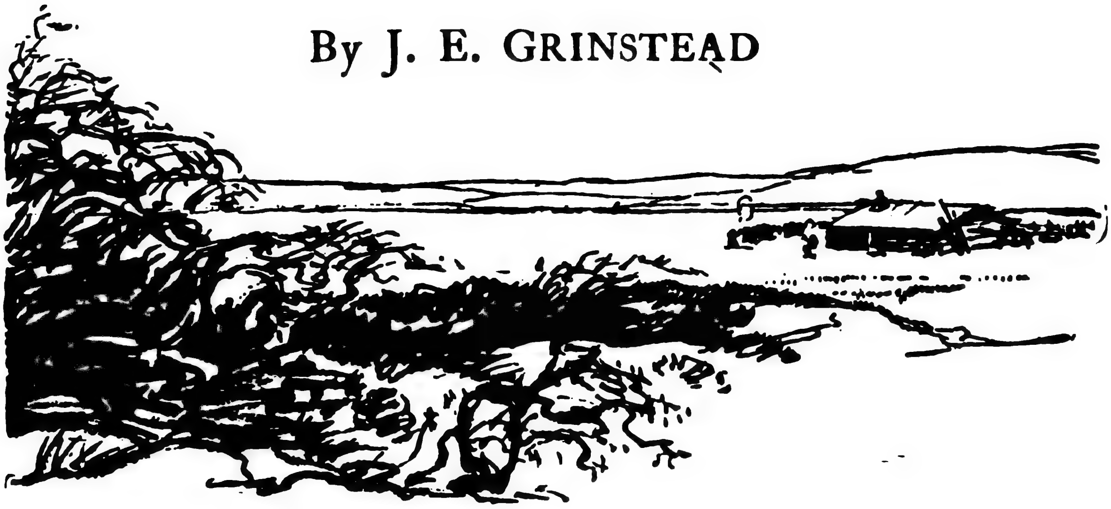
"No! Why, Josie would never forgive me if I did that with her boy."

So Breck had been obliged to content himself with hearing deputies tell of the wild forays they made, and of the killing or capture of desperate men. He now dropped into a chair, across the big, flat

When the Law, Alone, by Dark Trails and Perilous Ways, Invaded the Grim Sanctuary of Wanted Men

CITIES *of* REFUGE

By J. E. GRINSTEAD



topped desk from his uncle, and then said:

"You seem to be a little bit flustered this morning, Uncle Joe."

"Flustered? Hell, yes! Why wouldn't I be flustered. Tom Haines and Bart Webster, two as good men as there were in the State of Arkansas, killed right in the shadow of the Federal building—and me without a deputy to put on the trail of the killers."

"What about the police?"

"Oh, damn the police! They'll arrest some poor, ignorant farmer for leaving his team unhitched on the street, but— Anyway, it's out of the hands of the police, now. Out of their jurisdiction. The killers have passed beyond the Green Curtain, at the smoky doors of hell, and——"

"When did all this happen? Where did it happen? Who were the killers?"

"It happened a little while before daylight, this morning, in Mike Leedy's gambling room, within a stone's throw of this building. The only thing the police found out was that the killers crossed the river at daylight, and passed beyond the Green Curtain. They learned that much from the ferryman. Then they shrugged their uniformed shoulders and said: 'It's a job for the marshals now.' So they've got away, and gone to the Cities of Refuge."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, the Bible tells about six cities that the Jews built. When a fellow killed a man and wanted to claim it was an accident, he'd beat it to one of them towns, and the sheriff couldn't get him. And then——"

"I understand what you mean, now," said Breck, who had learned all about those cities of refuge when a boy at Sunday school. He smiled at the way his uncle handled the subject, and went on, "Who are the murderers? Do you know them?"

"Yes. Everybody knows the main one of them. He's lived here for years. Handsomest, best dressed, and most courteous and scholarly man in town, if he is a gambler. I don't reck'n there's a teacher that knows more about books, or a preacher that knows more about his Bible, in Fort Smith, than Fleet Gaynor knows."

Breck started violently at the name. Tybee eyed him oddly, and went on:

"I went down and talked to the ferryman. He says Rod Bolan, wanted everywhere in the world for every crime in the calendar, and a Creek breed by name of Charley Hosman, were with Gaynor and his daughter when they crossed the river."

"Have you sent anybody after them?"

"Hell, no! I've got nobody to send. That's what I was gripin' about when you come in. The Government has given me a district as big as China, and about half enough deputies to take care of Rhode Island. If I had a man to go now, he could catch 'em before they get into the Kiamitia Mountains, which are the real Cities of Refuge in that Indian country."

"I'll go after 'em," said Breck.

"You? No! I can't risk that."

"I want to go, and I'll bring them back."

"No, I tell you. I can't chance it. You don't know that Indian country, and the place where that outfit is going is a mile nearer hell than any other spot on earth."

"You don't seem to want those fellows as much as you let on you do," said Breck, with a smile in his eyes. "I'm a citizen of the United States, well past twenty-one years old, sound in mind and limb, never fought a duel or sent a challenge, and I haven't offered you any valuable thing to appoint me a deputy. I'm going after those fellows, anyway. Of course, if you don't want to appoint me——"

"Oh, dammit, Breck, shut up! You can't——"

"But I'm going to."

Half an hour later, Breck Cahill rode down the deep cut in the red bank of the Arkansas River, dismounted, and led his horse onto the ferry. He had his credentials as a regularly appointed deputy in his pocket, but he wasn't thinking about them. The boat cast loose, the current caught it and swept it toward the shimmering wall of tall cottonwoods on the opposite bank. That was the Green Curtain to which Marshal Tybee had referred. The boat landed, Breck mounted and went clattering off up through another deep cut, and on beyond the Green Curtain. He was due to see some strange things before he returned to that tawny river—if ever he did return.

BRECK CAHILL didn't realize at the moment just how near all his faculties a man needed when on a hunt like that. He didn't have all his faculties clearly at work, for he was sleepy, and the bright sun made things blur before his eyes. As a matter of fact, Breck had attended a dance the night before. It was at one of the old homes in Fort Smith. A house that had been built in antebellum days. The two great parlors had been thrown into one by opening the folding doors. Sixteen couples had danced at a time, the old fashioned square dances, to the music of a screaming fiddle and a plunking banjo. Breck had met a girl at the dance and had danced with her more than one set. She had dark red hair and brown eyes. Her lips and cheeks were naturally rosy, her features almost perfect, and her body lithe and lissom as a young pine.

The spring sun was bright and hot. As Breck rode sleepily on, his eyes would close from time to time, in spite of himself. When they did, he could hear the whine of the fiddle, the plunk-plunk of the banjo, the rhythmic fall of many feet, and the voice of the man who stood by the fiddler and prompted, as he called out, "Swing the lady on your left. Right hand to your partner, and grand right and left!" Then he would see the smile on his partner's lovely face, the loveliest in the world, he thought. Around the great circle they'd go, in opposite directions, until they met again. The same sweet smile was on those lips, and in those wonderful brown eyes, when they met. The prompter called out, in a singsong voice, "Partners, and promenade home." Away they went around the circle, while he held her soft warm hands. They reached their place, and he reluctantly dropped her hands, then he opened his eyes and blinked at the sunlight and the green woods about him.

That girl was Gale Gaynor. She was Fleet Gaynor's daughter. Fleet Gaynor was a murderer, fleeing from justice, and Gale was fleeing with him. He, Breck, was a deputy marshal, on the trail of Gaynor and his accomplices. He'd fight to keep his eyes open for a while, and ponder this monstrous thing. Then his eyes would close, and he'd go through it all again. Toward noon, he turned a little way from the trail, dismounted, and tethered his horse. He'd lie down on the mossy ground, beneath a tree, and sleep a few minutes, while his horse rested in the shade.

BACK in the marshal's office at Fort Smith, Joe Tybee walked the floor and cursed himself for a fool. He had let Breck force him, against his own will and better judgment, to appoint him and send him on a dangerous trail. If any misfortune befell the boy, his sister would never forgive him. He snarled in his throat. It was Josie's own fault. She had given that boy everything he had ever wanted in his life, except the moon, and had reached for that. The fool boy was gone. Gone because he wouldn't take “No!” for an answer. Breck had said he was going anyway, and he was a grown man. He couldn't put the fool in jail to keep him from going. Maybe the deputy's papers would help him. Anyway, if the boy got into a jam and shot anybody, his being an officer would help to get him out of it.

Two o'clock came and court reconvened. As he walked the floor, and fretted over Breck, Tybee heard the officer of the court lean out a window and call:

“Fleet Gaynor, Fleet Gaynor, Fleet Gaynor!” There were two other witnesses in that same case that would not be called. They had gone beyond the sound of human voice—Haines and Webster.

“Damn Fleet Gaynor,” growled the marshal, and then he remembered that Gaynor was one of the State's witnesses in a big murder case. A killing with which the gambler had nothing to do, except that he was an eyewitness. The court would order a fine entered against Gaynor for non-appearance, the issuance of an attachment for him. State's attorney would ask for a continuance. It would be granted, and so on, blah, blah, blah, while Joe Tybee continued to rave.

If he just had Welsh. Old, grizzly, mustached, square jawed, bowlegged Welsh. If he just had him to send on the trail of that boy. Welsh knew the Cities of Refuge. He knew every nook and cranny in that wild country. He knew the haunts and routes of criminals, as an Indian knows the runs and watering places of the red deer. But he didn't have Welsh. The game old deputy, who shot from the hip and explained while he reloaded, had been sent in another direction, to bring in some trivial offenders that the Federal grand jury had indicted, and wouldn't be back for another day, with the best of luck—which was the kind Welsh usually had.

SO THE marshal raved on, but had he known it, he needn't have raved quite so much or so soon. The object of his solicitude had lain down with the intention of sleeping half an hour. He had carefully placed his head on his arm, so that in half an hour the retarded circulation would cause his hand to tingle, and wake him. Oh, yes, Breck knew all that stuff. What he didn't know was that his head was going to slip off that arm, and he was going to sleep his head off, like any other healthy animal that had lost a lot of sleep.

He finally woke with a start, sat up, and looked about him. Long shadows were pointing to the east from the trees. He had set out at a little after ten o'clock to catch the criminals before they could get into the mountains. They had several hours head start of him when he left Fort Smith. Now he had given them a further start by sleeping five or six hours. He looked at his watch, ruefully, and climbing to his saddle, set out at a swift gait to make up some of the time he had lost. Joe Tybee had given him a plain waybill of the route he was to take. Tybee was thinking at the time that it would make it easier to trail Breck if they had to go after him.

By dusk, Breck was climbing into the rough, broken country. He was hungry enough to eat his horse, and not in twenty miles of the place where his uncle told him to spend the night. He came upon a cabin by the roadside and hailed it. A gaunt, bewhiskered man came out.

“Good evening, sir!” greeted Breck. “I'd like to get some feed for my horse and a night's lodging for myself.”

“We don't keep nobody. Ain't got room.”

“How far is it to the next house?”

“The next house, right on the road, air Gray's Store. Hit's twenty mile.”

“See here,” said Breck. “I'm a United States marshal, and——”

“Oh, y'are? That brings on more talk. Get down and onsaddle. I'm a newcomer in this settlement and sorty afeared to take in passers. They's right smart rough ones in here. I kin feed yo' horse and give you some vittles, sech as it is. Mebbe you kin make shift to sleep a little."

"Have you seen three men and a woman pass this way today?" asked Breck.

"Lowed mebbe you'd ask that," replied the man. "Yes, I seen 'em. One all-fired handsome man and about the purtiest girl I ever seen in my life. With 'em was a hard lookin' thug, armed to the teeth, and a Creek breed. The handsome gent wasn't having much to say. The tough mug seemed to be ramrodin' the outfit. Them the ones you're after?"

"Yes," said Breck. He knew he oughtn't to have said that, but he was square and honest, and it just popped out. He had heard the other deputies say it was hard to tell who stood in with the outlaws in that country. He'd be more careful from here on.

They watered the horse and put it in a log stable with another horse. When the animals were fed, the man locked the stable door with chain and padlock. After an abundant supper of coarse but wholesome food, Breck was given a bed to himself in a corner of the one room cabin, and in a few minutes he was dead to the world again.

Came morning, and Breck woke and stretched. The woman was cooking breakfast at the fireplace. She modestly left the cabin until Breck had time to dress. Then he went to the stable to feed his horse. He found that the man had already fed it and was walking about the barnyard, as if looking for something. He looked up and grinned good morning, then said:

"You're the best dang sleeper I seen in a long time, po'dner. The dawgs raised nine kinds of hell last night, and I got up to see what it was all about. Thought mebbe it was somebody trying to steal our braunks, and I reck'n hit were, but what with the lock and me and the dawgs and all, he didn't make it. There's some of the tracks. They're too big for yo'n, and too little for mine, so I reck'n they're about the right size for a hossthief's."

"Why, would they steal a horse out of a locked stable?" asked Breck.

"Locked stable, hell, mister! They'd steal the 'lasses out'n a ginger cake, and you chawin' on it. They're slick enough to do it, too. Looks like while you're hunting them fellers and the girl, mebbe they's huntin' you. They do that sometimes. If they could steal yo' braunk and set you afoot, hit would give them right smart chance to git plumb away. Course, it looks plumb silly for me to be talkin' that way to you, and you being a marshal and all, but——"

"No," said Breck. "I'm glad you're telling me these things. I'm a marshal, but this is my first trip into this country."

"Say it is!" said the man, staring at him. "I don't know what else you got, po'dner, but you shore got some nineteen and a half karat nerve to bust in here alone 'thout knowin' the country. And you're apt to raise it to twenty 'fore you get out. You better stop at Gray's Store. Old Kiel Gray kin give you the best line of anybody, if he'll talk. He's about the only storekeeper in this section that don't either stand in with the thieves, or else keep mum for business reasons. They've tried every way to run him out, and he's kilt half a dozen of 'em, but this is just the sorty aidge of the rough section."

After breakfast, Breck mounted and took the trail for Gray's Store. As he rode along, he revised his estimate of the job he had undertaken. He also made a note of some essential things, among them: not to talk too much, not to sleep too soundly at night, and none at all in the daytime, and to keep his eye on the trail and the bushes all the time. If this was just the "sorty aidge" of the rough country, the real thing must be pretty raw.

The fiddling and dancing were gone from Breck's ears, but the image of Gale Gaynor wasn't gone from his mind. What on earth ever drove a man like Fleet Gaynor to do murder? What did he mean by dragging a girl like Gale into such a place as this! These thoughts revolved in his mind, as he rode on toward Gray's Store.

CHAPTER II

OLD KIEL GRAY TALKS

BRECK reached Gray's Store at noon, after twenty miles of the roughest trail he had ever seen in his life. There was a shaggy, gray haired man standing in the door of the little store. He greeted Breck with a nod and grunt and turned back into the store, followed by his prospective customer. He went behind the counter, and Breck called for some tobacco. It was the first time he had ever seen a clerk in a store who had an old hog leg at his hip, and he decided that Mr. Gray had peculiar ideas concerning his help. This man was probably fifty years old. He was a big man, and his eyes were that deep, hard blue that could turn green in stressful moments. The man looked hard, and he was hard. Finally, Breck said:

"Is Mr. Gray about the place?"

"I'm him."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I have a letter for you." And he handed Gray a letter that Joe Tybee had written.

Gray read it, then fastened his eyes on Breck in a biting glance. At last he said:

"You're trailin' that outfit by yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"They passed here yesterday at noon, just one day ahead of you, and they're on good horse stock. You can't catch 'em."

"They'll stop when they think they're safe."

"Hum! Yes. But they won't think they're safe, as long as somebody's on their trail. They may not be ten mile from here, now, but there'll be somebody between you and them that'll stop you if you try to get 'em. I know Rod Bolan. He belongs to the worst gang in this country, and that's talking rough about 'em. I didn't know the breed that was with them, and I didn't know the other fellow. He had his pants in his boots, but he had on a longtailed preacher coat and a soft black hat. I didn't hear him nor the woman ary one speak. What did they do?"

Breck told of the murder, and when it had occurred. Gray let out a long, low whistle, and cursed.

"Has Joe Tybee gone crazy? What the hell's he mean, sending one man out for a gang like that? Don't he know——"

"He didn't have any more men to send. The others were all out, and he didn't want those fellows to get away."

"Hum! I see. Well, he ain't stopped 'em—yet. Ever been in this country before?"

"No, sir."

"I thought not. Now, I'm going to tell you something. Joe Tybee don't expect you to even try to take that outfit. All he expects you to do is sorty get their course and find out where they stop, so's he can send men to get 'em."

"He didn't tell me that," said Breck.

"Shore not. He didn't have to tell you. He knew you couldn't take it, and you'd find it out."

Breck colored at this. He had got off badly at the start, but he was learning, and he wasn't a quitter. Maybe Gray knew, and his Uncle Joe knew, he couldn't take the outfit, but he didn't know it, and didn't mean to admit it until he tried.

"If them fellows done something as bad as that, right at the door of the marshal's office," continued Gray, "they ain't goin' to stop in here. They're probably heading for the Arbuckle Mountains. That's another City of Refuge, a hundred mile or more west of here."

"I guess they'll leave a trail."

"Yes, they'll leave a trail, and when they get a little farther, they'll slow up. It won't look well for 'em to hurry too much. If you want to take this gang on, you got to come from the other way and meet 'em."

"I can't do that unless I pass them."

"Oh yes you can. Now, you listen to me, youngster. I know this country, and I know these varmints you are after. If you keep right on their trail, somebody'll shoot you from the brush before you go twenty mile farther. About a mile from here, the trail forks. You take the right hand. When you've gone another mile, you'll come to some cabins. Pass the time of day with them, be sure to tell 'em you're a marshal, and ask if that's the trail that leads west to Whitebead and the Upper Washita country. They'll tell you yes, and you ride. If you ride until midnight, you'll strike a plain trail that crosses this one. Then lay up and sleep until daylight.

"Come morning, take the south end of that cross trail and you hit the crossin' on the Blue River—and, incidentally, you'll be about four inches from the middle of hell. You'll be ahead of yo' gang, if they're going that way, for those fellows at the cabins will get word to 'em that you're makin' for Whitebead, and they'll slow up. What happens after that is yo' business. Only, if you meet 'em on the trail, kill Rod Bolan first, then the breed. After that you can say howdy to the other fellow and the girl."

Breck studied the matter a moment. Kiel Gray was a hard-looking citizen, but

Joe Tybee must know he'd do to tie to, or he wouldn't have sent him a letter. At last Breck said:

"That looks like darn good strategy, Mr. Gray, and I'll do it. I'll stop here and feed my animals on the way back." And mounting, Breck rode away down the hill, toward the creek crossing, where the roads forked, while Gray stood in the door, watching him.

"Strategy, hell!" he muttered. "Joe Tybee ought to be shot for sending that youngster in here alone. The best strategy was when I sent him on a wild-goose chase, to get him out of the nest before they killed him."

He turned back into the store, planning a little speech he'd make to Joe Tybee the next time he saw him.

BRECK took the right hand, as promised, and he came to the cabins. There were three men at the place. He spoke to them. Told them he was a marshal, on his way to Whitebead, and rode on when they said he was on the right trail. There was only one bad feature about this detour, to Breck. That was that it took him farther away from Gale Gaynor, and he believed she needed help.

He had fallen in love with this girl, and didn't deny it to himself. He was sure she hadn't taken part in any crime, and that she was not going with that gang of her own accord. In a word, no matter what Fleet Gaynor may have done, the girl was virtually a prisoner, and he meant to rescue her. He had heard and read of lovely women who belong to such gangs, and who were even leaders of them, but Gale Gaynor wasn't such, he *knew*.

Tired in every muscle, and his horse dragging its feet in weariness, Breck reached the cross trail at midnight. It was on a high, windswept prairie, but the night was warm and balmy. Unsaddling his horse, he lariated it to a button willow a little way from the trail and went to sleep. No danger out here on the top of the world. He hadn't seen a human being since he left the cabins where he asked the way. He had no idea that shrewd Old Kiel Gray had sensed his incapacity for the job in hand, and sent him out of the danger zone to save his life.

At daylight, he was riding south on that cross trail. He hadn't asked the distance from that cross trail to the Blue River, and Gray hadn't told him it was sixty miles. Night found him still plodding wearily on through a timbered country that was just flat, sandy woods. The trail was a dreary monotony. The little food he carried in his saddle pockets was all gone, and he was still hungry. Worn out at last, he made a cheerless camp a little way from the trail. While he lay on the ground looking up through the treetops at the stars, he cursed himself for a fool. Why hadn't he stuck to the main trail? No telling where Bolan and Gaynor were by this time. His Uncle Joe might have confidence in Old Kiel Gray, but the indications to him were that Gray had deliberately put him off the trail of the fugitives.

If he had read that letter to Gray, he would have known more. There was one line of it which read: "Don't let this fool boy get into trouble." Knowing nothing of that, Breck decided that Gray belonged to the same gang with Bolan. Oh, well. He was going south, now. All he had to do was to turn east at the first plain trail he struck, and that would take him back into the City of Refuge where Rod Bolan and Fleet Gaynor were in hiding, with Gale Gaynor as a prisoner. He still insisted to himself that the girl had no part in the crime. It didn't occur to him that, with his infatuation for Gale, he would be easily led into any trap where she was used for bait.

Breck slept a while but his empty stomach cried out and woke him. He saddled and rode on, in hopes of finding a house and food.

At daylight, he came to a trail that ran in from the northeast, forming a V where it struck the trail he was traveling. Here was the trail that led back toward Gray's Store and the neighborhood that Bolan and Gaynor would hide in. But he was hungry and had to eat. As he sat debating whether he should turn into that trail, he heard a low, roaring noise, ahead of him and to the right. At the same time, he heard chickens crowing and a dog bark. That couldn't be far away. He'd push on and get food, then he'd come back and take that trail.

As he rode on, that roaring increased in volume, and the familiar sounds of calves bleating, dogs barking and chickens crowing came to him plainer. The trail dropped down a steep incline, and he found himself in a narrow river bottom. There was a little field at the west side of the road, and just beyond it he came to a house, set in a thick grove and very close to the road. The east was getting pink by this time, and was throwing considerable light on an open window next to the road. A woman sat in the window, looking out toward the road. Suddenly Breck jerked his horse to a stop. The woman was Gale Gaynor! It was only for an instant. The girl motioned frantically for him to ride on, and he did so, but with the mental reservation that he wouldn't ride very far. Gray was right, after all, except that he had not really got ahead of his quarry. He would get ahead of them, now.

Quarter of a mile farther on, he came to a store and a cluster of shabby houses. At the same time, he realized that the roaring he heard was a rapid in a river. This was the crossing of the Blue, but Gray hadn't told him there was a town there. This was one of those Cities of Refuge, he supposed. Maybe he couldn't take on the gang there, but he'd watch them. The store was just opened as he rode up. The merchant hadn't had his coffee, and he waited on Breck, sleepily, while the young man bought a liberal supply of canned food and crackers. Breck didn't mean to stay in that town. He was going to hide somewhere and eat. Then he was going to do a good job of secret watching. He put his purchases in a sack, tied them to his saddle, mounted, and rode on toward the river crossing. He couldn't know that another man, a rat faced, shifty eyed midget, had watched him from behind a stack of flour all the time he was in the store. And, as Breck went out the front, this individual had passed out the back and watched from the bushes, and watched him ride on toward the crossing. Then he went back into the store.

"Marshal!" he said to the merchant. "I can tell 'em anywhere."

"Yes," drawled the merchant, sleepily, "but he's after something bigger than a whisky peddler. You don't have to be skeered. Them few jugs you got hid out are safe from that gent. He's stalkin' big game."

"Huh! You might be right. They's big game here all right."

"Whatcha mean?"

"Rod Bolan and Charley Hosman and some more rides in here about dark last night and stops at Sam Blake's place."

"Then there's more'n one marshal. Ain't no one marshal on the force that would tackle them fellows."

"Reck'n we ought to let Rod and them know about it?" asked the whisky peddler.

"You can. I'm stayin' out of this. They'll send you up for two years for peddlin' whisky if they catch you. They'll send you up for life if they ketch you with the Bolan gang—or else Old Judge Parker'll break yo' neck. The Gov'ment's used right smart rope over there at Fort Smith, but they're still makin' it. If I was in yo' business, I'd lay low. I ain't heard that the Bolan gang needs help."

"That sounds reasonable," mused the bootlegger. "I did aim to do a little business here today, but I reck'n that stuff I got'll keep a day or two."

He slipped out the back door and lost himself in the brush.

AS BRECK rode down to the stream, he caught his breath. Never had he seen a river like that. It was called the Blue, and it was blue. The sun was just rising, and the light on the water made it resemble blue diamonds. The trail crossed a broad, swift shallow, just above a rapid. Below the rapid, a great, glassy blue pool stretched away and went out of sight around a bend. Crossing the stream, Breck turned sharp to the right into thick woods. This river seemed to be the borderland of the civilized world, and beyond it, nothing but primitive, unsettled wilderness. The roaring sound was now to Breck's right and up the river, ahead of him. It didn't sound like water falling over a precipice, but just a subdued roaring, swishing sound. He came out in a tiny glade, where there was grass for his horse, and stopped. He'd camp here for a while. If Bolan was going to push on that day, he'd follow the main trail southwest.

Through an opening in the trees he could see a quarter of a mile of the trail, where it climbed out of the river bottom and ran along higher ground. More than likely the outlaws, now out of the immediate neighborhood of their crime, and even out of the country where they would be expected to go, would rest a day or two. If they were going on that day, they'd ride early. So, seating himself where he could watch the trail through the opening, he munched his cold breakfast, greedily. He had just finished eating when a lone rider came into view on the trail, but he was coming from the other direction and riding at a swift gait. Breck got out a pair of small glasses, fixed them to his eye, and focused them. The rider was not more than a quarter of a mile away, and through the glasses every detail was clear in the morning sunlight. He was a hard bitted specimen and armed to the teeth. His eyes were fixed on the trail ahead of him, for most of the time, but occasionally he cast a swift glance behind him. He passed out of sight and went on across the stream to the little town.

It would have interested Breck to have known what passed so near to his hiding place if he could have heard it. The stranger rode straight to Sam Blake's place, dismounted and went in. At the door he ran square into the scowling Rod Bolan.

"Hello, Rod. What are you doing here?"

"Traveling, on business. Aim to ride in a little while."

"Which way?"

"Cross the creek and on, southwest."

"Better not. There's two marshals and a squad of Indian police shelling the woods for me up that way. I dodged 'em on the head of Pennington last night. Better turn back with me. I'm going on as soon as I get some coffee. We'll drift into the Kimish country."

"Yes," snarled Bolan, "and run into an army of marshals. They'll all be huntin' for me. I'm headed for the Arbuckles."

"Oh, all right," shrugged the visitor. "You know your business. But don't ride that way today. You'll meet trouble. Hole up here. Sam can take care of you."

He pushed on into Mr. Blake's alleged hotel, to get some breakfast and coffee.

Mr. Sam Blake appeared to be a shambling, lantern jawed nonentity; but he wasn't. He had been running this quasi-tavern for a year. Back of the fairly roomy and respectable appearing house, where he housed and fed his guests, there were several detached cabins that had been the original homestead. Just back of these was thick brush, and back of that, few knew what.

"Sam," said Rod Bolan, as soon as he could find his host and take him aside, "we're in a trap. That fellow says the whole country's lousy with marshals and Indian police the way he come."

"Well," replied Sam, shifting his uncertain, muddy gray eyes. "You'll just have to turn back into the Kimish country, and——"

"Hell, no! We can't do that. They'll take that country apart for us in a day or two. This job we pulled is a neck stretcher if we get caught. We done it for Bud Starr, and they'll never stick him since them fellers are gone, but if they ever catch us. . . ."

"Well," drawled Blake. "If you can't back up and can't go forward, all you can do is stay where you're at. You three fellers could stay in that cabin where you slept last night for a month, and nobody'd ever think of lookin' there for you."

"Shore! But what about the girl?"

"Oh, she'll be all right. She's my neice, if it comes to a showdown."

"Your niece!" sneered Bolan. "You'd play hell havin' a niece like that."

"Well, she belongs to the gang, don't she," grinned Blake.

"Yes, and she belongs to me, too, but she don't know it—yet. She's just joined up, and I don't trust these new ones. I seen 'em too often. They're apt to remember something their mothers told 'em sometime and turn back on you. You'll have to hide her good, and do it at once. If she ever let out one squawk, where a marshal could hear her, it would be good-by."

"Well, you could let the marshals take her and——"

"She's mine, I tell you!" snapped Bolan. "And you want to be damn careful how you handle her."

So it chanced that Rod Bolan's gang, caught between two fires, didn't try to ride that day. Old Kiel Gray had told Breck when he got to that crossing on the Blue, he'd be within four inches of the middle of hell. It was a good guess. He missed it only four inches. It was the middle, just then.

Breck kept his vigil until mid-forenoon. He then decided that if the quarry meant to move before nightfall, they would have started before this time. So he quit watching and turned his attention to that roaring water. It was just a little way up the stream, and beyond a thick curtain of trees and brush. Picking his way through the brush, he came out on a broad waste of rock that was slashed and fretted with a hundred blue ribbons of swirling water, as it roared through the fissures in the barrier. The fissures were from one to three feet wide and of unknown depth. Breck had struck the lower end of the long obstruction, where the water came out of its channels with a swishing roar and blended again into a single stream. He was standing, spellbound at the beauty of the thing when his eye caught a figure leaping swiftly across the channels and coming toward where he stood. He stepped out of the brush onto the edge of the waste of rock, and a white hand waved him back. It was a woman. And as she stepped quickly into the thicket where he stood, he recognized Gale Gaynor!

CHAPTER III

BRECK HAS A PUZZLE TO SOLVE

"QUICK, Mr. Cahill! Get back into the woods—and stay! Don't go out on those rocks. You can be plainly seen from——"

"From where?"

"Oh, I can't tell you, but—Mr. Cahill, you're following us!"

"Yes," said Breck, grimly.

"Please go back. You're in danger every minute, and——"

"What about you? Don't you think you're in danger?"

"No, no. Father's with me, and no one would dare to harm me. I'm in no danger at all."

Breck mulled this over in silence for a few moments. Was his dream a nightmare after all? Was this pure, innocent looking girl really and knowingly a member of Rod Bolan's band of outlaws? Such things had happened in the world, but he couldn't believe that Gale Gaynor was such a woman as that. When Breck had a puzzle to contend with, he always took it apart and looked at it, and he began at once to do just that with this puzzle.

"Miss Gaynor," he said, "did you think I was just following you on my own account, as a private citizen, because I thought you were in trouble?"

"I—I had hoped, since I saw you this morning that—that——" And she stuck, with an odd expression in her brown eyes.

"I've done a good deal of hoping myself since I first saw you, and it begins to look as if those hopes were about to be killed. But—I'm still hoping. I hate to disappoint you, but it is not altogether you that I'm following."

"Why, what do you mean!"

"I mean that I'm a marshal, and that I'm after Rod Bolan, Charley Hosman, your father, and——"

"Father! Why, he——"

"Beg pardon. I didn't finish. I was about to say, and you."

She looked at him in wild eyed astonishment.

"Why, Mr. Cahill, you're— You know I haven't done anything wrong, and I'm only going with my father to——"

"To where?"

"I can't tell you."

"I see. I don't think you have done anything wrong, and I don't believe you would knowingly do anything wrong. Yet, I have a warrant for your arrest in my pocket, and I'm serving it at this moment. You are my prisoner."

She whirled, and he caught her arm. Not roughly but firmly.

"Don't try to do that. I won't let you get away, now that I have you. If you want to scream, scream as loud as you can. Nothing would please me better."

Breck didn't think she would scream, and he was right. She didn't. She just stood looking at him, aghast.

"Now, Miss Gaynor," he said, gently, "just sit down there on that boulder in the shade and let's talk this thing over. I'm in the dark, and I think you are. It's as much a puzzle to me that you are escaping from the country with Rod Bolan as anything on earth could be."

"I'm not escaping with Rod Bolan," she said, as she sat down on the indicated boulder and drew a long breath. "He's a repulsive, loathsome thing. But he and Hosman know this wild country, and they're piloting my father through it."

"But why is your father passing through it in this manner? You have crossed one railroad since you left Fort Smith. Why didn't you take the train and go where you pleased?"

"I—I don't know, only that officers are after father for a crime he didn't commit."

"And you're taking all this hardship and danger for your father. That's beautiful, but——"

"But what!" And she was staring into his level gray eyes, as if she'd see to their very depths.

"Useless. Do you know what the crime is that is charged to your father, Bolan, and Hosman?"

"No! I didn't know Bolan and Hosman were charged with any crime. I—I understood it was an old crime that father had known about, but had nothing to do with."

Breck shook his head.

"This makes it pretty hard for me, Miss Gaynor. You don't believe I'd deceive you, do you?"

"No. I don't know any reason why you should deceive me."

"And you wouldn't deceive me?"

"No."

"Then why did you wave a warning to me this morning when I passed the house where you were?"

"Why, I— Oh, Mr. Cahill, I—I overheard Bolan talking to Hosman when father wasn't near. He said, 'If anybody butts in on this, we'll just have to shoot our way out of it.' "

"They're that desperate, and yet you think they're only guides for your father. You are in more danger at this moment, Miss Gaynor, than you have ever been in your life. I know you are not implicated in the crime with which your father and those two men are charged. At the time that crime was committed, I was dancing with you to the strains of 'Home, Sweet Home,' and it was the happiest moment of my life."

Gale flushed under his ardent gaze, and then in a low tone, she murmured:

"I, too, was happy, then. But, now . . . Ah, now. There is little enough happiness in the world. Tell me, please, what makes you think I'm in danger now."

"I don't think it, I know it. You are in the hands of unscrupulous men, or rather you have been. I'm going to do all I can to protect you from them, but——"

"What is this terrible crime with which father and those two men are charged?"

"Murder!" The word came like a shot, and the last syllable was not clear of his lips, until Breck wished he had not spoken it. The girl went white and gasped for breath.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried. "Not my father. He'd never do that! He's a gambler, I know, and I've shed many bitter tears over the fact. But he's the kindest, dearest father in all the world. He wouldn't hurt anyone. He's—he's all I have in the world." Tears sprang to her eyes. Presently, she brushed them away and went on, "Tell me all you know about it. They have kept something from me."

"I don't know very much about it. Two men were killed in the back room of Mike Leedy's gambling place about the time our dance broke up. Your father, Bolan, and Hosman were in the room, and several men saw the killing. Immediately afterward, the three of them, taking you with them, escaped across the river."

"I—I never heard of that before. Bolan and Hosman may have killed those men, but father didn't. I tell you, he couldn't do a thing like that."

"Then why did he run away with the others?"

"I don't know. I don't know! You're killing me with these questions."

"I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world. I'm only trying to work out a puzzle. If your father is not guilty, with these men, help me try to find out why he is with them, and why he would put you in such a position."

"I can't help you. I don't know anything. Just when I got home from the dance, father came in, all excited, and told me we had to leave town at once. He told me to get ready and not to ask any questions. That he would explain it all to me later."

"And he hasn't explained?"

"No. He has had no opportunity. We have not been alone together since we started."

"Why did you come across the river?" asked Breck in the hope of getting a thread that would solve his puzzle.

"I—I—" Gale's face went crimson. "I

came to warn you. I didn't think I was in any danger and I knew you were."

This stopped Breck. His heart was pounding like a trip hammer. This wonderful woman had taken a chance like that for him. He was sitting on the big boulder by her side. He turned his face away from her to get control of himself. He heard a movement, and turning his head, saw her dart through the fringe of bushes toward the river. He sprang after her, but by the time he gained the edge of the rocky waste she was springing across the roaring blue channels. If she had been a man, he would have stopped her with a shot. But, being a woman, and that particular woman, he could only stand and stare after her. Something told him not to follow, and that something told him wisely. On the opposite side of the stream she turned and waved him back, then disappeared into the thick fringe of brush.

BRECK cursed under his breath. His puzzle wasn't solved. This woman was a greater puzzle to him than anything he had ever known in his life. Was she playing with him? He didn't believe it, and yet . . . If she was, he was in real danger now. If she meant to entrap him, the danger would come to him across that stony way, just as she had come. He sought a place where he could sit down and watch that scarred and riven crossing. He fingered his gun, nervously. If only Bolan or Hosman or even Gaynor would come across there, but he couldn't shoot a woman.

The hours dragged on, and Breck sat watching that glaring crossing until his eyes ached. He'd never run. In fact, there was no place to which he could run. If he recrossed the river and sought to ride back toward Gray's Store, he would ride right into their trap, if they had set one for him. A thousand times, in those dragging hours, the thought came to him that Gale Gaynor was a criminal among criminals, and just as often he put the thought from him. If she was innocent, why did she break away from the protection he offered her and fly back to men that she must know were criminals? There was no answer to this either, as the sun crossed the zenith and dropped slowly to the west. Breck had forgotten hunger, thirst, everything except the puzzling situation.

Late in the afternoon Breck crept back into the grove. He took his horse to a little hidden spring and gave it water, then took it back and lariated it on fresh grass. After that, he ate a little of the cold food he had, then stole back to his lookout, at the edge of the rocky crossing. The stillness of death was over the world, except for the ceaseless roar of the water. There was no moving thing in sight. The sun sank lower and lower, and at last disappeared behind the treetops, while a thousand shadows blended into one, and the day was ended.

Breck had his eyes fixed on the curtain of bushes on the opposite side of the stream. His mind was made up to one thing; he was going across to the other side and have a little look as soon as darkness fell. He started violently, as he saw those bushes part and a face peer out. A moment later Gale Gaynor came springing across those channels, straight toward him! This was a different Gale Gaynor from the one that had run away from him earlier in the day. There was a long bruise on one of her cheeks. Her face was tear stained, one sleeve of her dress was torn almost away, and her hair was disheveled. She reached the edge of the rocks, saw Breck in the shadows, came reeling toward him and would have fallen but that he caught her in his arms.

"What—who did that?" he asked.

"That—that brute!" she replied, gasping and sobbing for breath.

"What brute?"

"Bolan! He—he——" and she shuddered at the thought. Then, when she had recovered her breath a little, she went on rapidly: "When I got back there today, they had put father in a room and locked the door. They wouldn't let me see him. Then, just a little while ago, Bolan told me to get ready to ride. I asked him where father was, and Bolan said he wasn't going. Then I tried to run away, and he caught me. Oh, I—I— It's horrible."

"Come, come!" said Breck. "Don't give way like that. Tell me all there is to tell."

"That's all, except terrible things he said that I can't repeat. Oh, Mr. Cahill, I— You were right. We're both in danger, and I—I think they have killed father."

"Well, just sit down here and wait," said Breck, "and I'll go across there and have a look at the situation."

"No, no! You're all—you're the only friend I have left, and I won't leave you again. Besides, you'd never find the place. I'll go with you."

A few minutes later, in the gathering night, they stole across the stream, the roar of the water drowning their footfalls as they sprung across the channels that gleamed in the starlight. Once through the curtain of bushes on the other side, Gale whispered:

"Follow close behind me and make no noise." Then she led the way along a ravine.

A hundred yards farther on, they climbed a steep bank on the west side of the gorge, and crept along a shelf under an overhanging bluff. Stopping from time to time to listen, they at last came to an open door in the bluff. Inside was Stygian darkness, and there was not a sound to be heard. Gale took hold of Breck's hand and groped forward in the darkness. They came to a wall and stopped.

"This is the door to the room where father is," she whispered. "Maybe you can——"

It was natural enough for the girl to want to get to her father, and Breck had forgotten all caution since he had seen her bruised face. He wasn't a marshal now. He was just a man. A human animal, roused to rage because someone had mistreated his mate. He wanted to come to grips with Rod Bolan, but because Gale wanted it, he wanted first to restore her to her father. He was feeling of the fastenings of the door, not daring to make a light, when he fell, down, down, and on down, for ages, then struck with a bump and lay still.

WHEN Breck came to, he was lying on the ground, and to his surprise he was not in a bottomless pit. He could see a square of skylight, which was obviously the door through which he and Gale Gaynor had entered the place. He wasn't bound. He slipped his hand down, and his pistol was still in its holster. He remembered that he had left his rifle on his saddle. Next, he put his hand to his head. There was a sizable bump there. He tried to sit up, and that square of light began to run around in a circle, so he lay down again and closed his eyes.

When things settled a bit, he turned on his side and struck a match. He knew it was a dangerous thing to do, but he had reached a point that he didn't care. He saw that he was in a good sized cavern, and that there was one door, besides the one where he and the girl had come in. The other door, which led to the room where she said her father was, was also open. The match burnt out. Breck ventured to sit up again, and this time the door stood still and behaved itself as a door should. He felt his way through that inner door and struck another match. There was nothing in the room but a cot and some blankets, and no sign of death by violence. There was no door in that room, leading to another chamber, so he had seen all there was to see, and there was no one there but himself.

The night air cooled his head as he staggered down the ravine to the river, and when he had bathed his face and the knot on his head, he was able to negotiate the dangerous way across the gleaming ribbons of water. He knew, of course, that his horse and saddle would be gone, but he wanted to get back there for a starting point. To his surprise his horse was quietly grazing at the end of its rope, and the saddle, with the rifle in its scabbard, was where he had left it. This was as puzzling to him as what had already happened. The girl had led him into a trap for some purpose. Why hadn't they killed him? Perhaps they thought they had. Why hadn't they taken his horse? She knew where it was. Perhaps they didn't want to be burdened with it.

What time of night was it, anyway? He took out his watch, snapped a match, and saw that it was eight-thirty. He hadn't been out so long. It must have been after six when he entered that cave. Maybe a whole day was gone and this was another night. He turned the stem of his watch a couple of turns, and it was tight. No. He always wound it at six. That was about right. He had his feet on the earth again now, and incidentally, some fine fighting blood was stirring in his veins. They had only a couple of hours start of him this time, and he meant to find out which way they went. The next time he got sight of that gang, business would pick up, and the next time he got his hands on that girl, she'd wear a new kind of bracelet, for he had them in his pocket.

Hurriedly saddling his horse, he mounted, rode out to the trail and turned back toward the river. His head ached, but he meant to use it a bit from here on. At the river, he dismounted and struck a match. The ground was dry to the water's edge. No one had come that way from the town since nightfall. So he climbed to his saddle and rode on. Early as it was, not yet nine o'clock, the town was asleep. Not a sound but the pad of his horse's hoofs in the deep sand of the road. Not a light showing at Sam Blake's place. Breck shook his fist at it as he passed and promised himself that some day he'd have a look at that establishment; but he was busy now.

"City of Refuge," he muttered to himself, and rode on to that V shaped fork in the road that he had seen at daylight that morning. Here he dismounted again and struck another match. The sand was still damp where four horses had taken the right hand, heading toward Gray's Store. Breck mounted and followed. He was sure they had come in over that road the night before. Now they were doubling back. Why? Evidently he had turned them back. He knew nothing about the report that the outlaw had given Rod Bolan that morning that the whole country was full of Indian police and marshals in the other direction. So, with that much to bolster him for the effort, he set forward for a night's ride. If he couldn't catch them, perhaps he could drive them back to where there was somebody that could catch them.

Then his mind reverted to Gale Gaynor. If she had purposely led him into a trap, what was she doing with that bruise on her face, and her dress torn to rags? He couldn't answer that. So he veered to one of the horse tracks. Why was that narrow plate across the shoe? He could answer that all right. He'd seen that before. The horse had a cracked hoof, and that plate across the heel was to keep the shoe from spreading. That would make the trail easy to follow, for such shoes were unusual. He came to a fork in the trail. Dismounting, he struck a match and held it low to the ground, in the cup of his hands. There was that barred track. They had taken the right hand, heading due east. They couldn't dodge him now, with that track to go by. They were seeking some City of Refuge, but, like the blood avengers of ancient times, he meant to overhaul them before they reached it—if he could.

CHAPTER IV

GUNFLASHES IN THE DARK

NIGHT fighting, where men fired at gunflashes and hits were rarely made, was common enough in that land of the Cities of Refuge, but Breck Cahill had only heard of, and had not seen, the real thing. He pushed steadily on in the dim starlight, keeping a close watch for forking trails where he might lose the track of his quarry.

His horse climbed an abrupt rise, and looking down, he dimly saw the rails of a railroad and realized that it was the grade he had climbed. He remembered that railroad track. He had crossed it as he went west from Gray's Store. It was the only one in that country. He knew, too, that the course they were taking would throw them into the Kimish Mountains, thirty miles to the southeast of Gray's, which was the real City of Refuge for criminals in that lawless land. If Bolan and his company ever got in there, they'd join up with other gangs, and it would take an army to get them out. Breck spurred forward at the thought. He must come to grips with them before they got into the mountains.

A mile farther on, the trail dropped into a dense dark bottom, and he had to trust to the instinct of his horse to follow the way. In that bottom the trail forked. The right hand turned farther to the south, and the left went on east. It was here that four riders stopped, and two of them drew apart from the others.

"I'm for keeping straight on and joining up with the main gang at the Walnut Springs hangout," growled Hosman.

"I'm not," snapped Bolan. "I don't want to get into no big crowd with this outfit. It would——"

"Aw, hell!" snarled Hosman. "You've gone crazy over that girl. If you'd listened to me in the first place, we'd have done our little job in Fort Smith and got out of town. If you'd listen to me now, we'd——"

"Oh, shut up. I've got the girl. I took her because I wanted her, and I aim to keep her. It was the only way I could get her. If we had croaked Gaynor, she wouldn't have come. The only thing was to double-cross him and then bring him along. We've done all we agreed to do. We've kept him and Haines and Webster from testifying ag'in Bud Starr, and——"

"Yes, but Gaynor ain't goin' to stay double-crossed. He's gettin' wise, and that girl takes to you about as much as she do to poison. 'Sides that, they's somebody on our trail."

"Huh!" snorted Bolan. "That somebody don't trouble me. I know all the marshals, and he ain't one of 'em. If he was, he ain't on our trail now. If he wasn't dead when we left him, Sam Blake finished him, for I told Sam to go over there and do it."

"I know, but he's just one. He didn't ride into this country by himself. Don't nobody do a fool thing like that."

"He did. That yap's just some young fool that's stuck on the girl and is following her with the idea that he can take her away from me. By the time he gets her, he won't want her. If he gets in my way again, he won't want her nohow. We had to be careful and not do any shooting back there, but we're east of the railroad now. If Blake lets him get away, it won't be a club next time. It'll be a bullet or two, right through his guts."

"Aw, to hell with next time. It's this time that I'm interested in. If you aim to turn south here, start yo' cattle and let's go. We've got to get somewhere before morning, and it's after midnight now."

"All right. I'll start— Hush! Listen! What's that?"

"It's somebody coming along the trail," growled Hosman, "but it's only one horse."

"I don't care if it is only one, let him have it. He's got to be stopped."

The two desperadoes had left Gaynor and his daughter at the fork of the trail and had merely drawn back fifty yards on the trail they had come, to do their talking.

"All right, I'll stop him, but you take that left hand trail so we can get to the gang. We ain't got as much chance as a hummin' bird in a hawk fight if we go south. If you don't do it, I quit right here."

"All right. I'll do it, but we'll settle it some other time," snapped Bolan, and whirling his horse, he rode back to where Gaynor and the girl sat their horses, waiting. He led them into the left hand trail, and told them to ride. Just as they set forward at a brisk trot, a gun roared behind them, and their horses plunged on in the darkness.

Hosman fired but the one shot, then listened. He could hear Bolan and his companions galloping on through the dark bottom, but there was not a sound back where that lone rider had been. Could it be possible that he had got him the first shot? Not likely. Then he heard a horse snort, and fired again at the sound. That shot brought him the surprise of his life. The eleven shots from a Winchester carbine sprayed the trail, quickly followed by six more from a six-shooter. Hosman was burnt slightly by a bullet, and his horse was hit twice. Hosman knew his gunmen. He had no idea who the fellow was. He was sure there was but one man, and that he was no novice as a lead slinger. When those guns were loaded again that was going to be an unhealthy place. So, turning tail, he tore away down the trail after Bolan and the others.

He caught them a mile down the trail, just as they were crossing a broad stream. They halted as Hosman came up, and Bolan said:

"What was that, back there? The United States Army?"

"No!" snapped Hosman. "It was one man, but he's a lead slingin' fool. I'm hit and they's a coupla bullets in my horse. We got to hide."

"Oh, if it's only one man——"

"One man, hell! You know one marshal don't never head for Walnut Springs by hisself. One man does that shooting, but they's more in hearing of it, and they'll come like a swarm of bees. We're goin' to leave the trail at Fall Creek and hide out at Whisky Dick's today. Then tonight we can take the mountain trail across to the Walnut Springs hangout."

"But Whisky Dick don't like for us fellows to come to his place, and——"

"I don't care what he likes," snapped Hosman. "He's done a lot of things that I didn't like. I aim to dodge them marshals, and get this wound tended to. Come on. I lead from here on. If you don't want to follow me, you can keep the main trail at Fall Creek and take your own chances." And Hosman spurred forward, with the others at his heels.

Presently they climbed out of the black bottom and on up a steep hill. Ahead of them the sky line was notched and jagged. In the distance were the Kiamitia Mountains. The "Kimish" the natives called them. The stronghold and chief City of Refuge of the outlaws of the lawless Southwest. As they passed over the ridge and headed down a slope, the first streaks of dawn were breaking ahead of them. Hosman was setting a swift pace. He knew the danger of being skylighted and shot, on top of that ridge. He had fired the first shot, and he knew there'd be no more questions asked. They had to either give their pursuers the slip, and hide out, or else shoot it out the best they could. There was only two of them, for they had not allowed Gaynor to have arms. He knew what would happen in a gun fight with two such gun slingers as the one back there, and there were probably half a dozen of them.

Half a mile farther on, they came to the broad, shallow crossing of a swift, clear stream that flowed over a smooth rock bottom. Without a word, Hosman turned sharp to his left and followed the bed of the stream. He wasn't doing it on account of the old trick of hiding tracks. That was too old. A white man would see through that in a minute these days. He was doing it because that was the only route to the place he sought. He glanced back, saw that Bolan and the others were following him, then spurred on up the stream.

BACK in the dark bottom, Breck Cahill was playing fox. After hearing the riders gallop away, he crept cautiously forward and found the fork of the trail. He didn't know which way his quarry went. He could find out very easily by striking a match and looking for that track with the cross plate in the shoe. Also, he could get shot by the light of that match if the gang had left a rear guard. There were little streaks of dawn showing in the east, so he waited for daylight. Finding that the tracks followed the main trail, he swore at the delay which gave again Bolan an hour or two start of him, then he spurred on along the trail.

He had heard plenty of the Walnut Springs country, and he knew he had to catch his men before they reached it, or not at all. He figured that he was matching himself against three men, for he didn't know that Gaynor was not armed, and was only a sort of hostage. Gale Gaynor had deceived him twice, but he knew he could never bring himself to shoot at her. He had heard stories of the wives and daughters of outlaws living in the old river town, and no one ever suspecting who they were. Now, he thought, he had concrete evidence that those wild stories were true. It hurt when he thought of that, for, to him, Gale Gaynor had been the one woman. That was over, but he had to have a reckoning with Rod Bolan. But for him, Gale might have stayed in town, might have gone to other dances, might have come to love him, and forsaken her outlaw friends.

At the clear, swift stream he saw that track with the cross plate in the little bar of sand and dirt at the edge of the water. He rode across the stream, and didn't see it on the other side. Clearly they had followed the stream. But which way had they followed it? The smooth rock bottom led away down the stream and around a bend, as well as up the stream. He rode back into the water and stopped. The sun was up now, and through the clear water he could see the bottom plainly. A little way up the stream there was a pocket of sand and silt, and there were horses' tracks, not yet filled up by the rippling water. With a nod, Breck set forward up the stream, toward a roaring that he could hear.

Half a mile farther on, he reached a fall, where the creek banks became walls of stone. Dismounting, he led his horse up the steep bank and found the narrow way that led into the swift water above the fall, where a horse could scarcely keep its feet. Mounting again, he rode on. Quarter of a mile above the fall, the gorge ended, and the stream was flowing gently through a little cove in the foothills of the Kimish. The trail left the water, which was now not so swift and much deeper. Here in the trail was the cross plate track, and evidence that four horses had passed that way.

Breck heard a dog bark, and jerked his horse to a sudden stop. He hadn't supposed there was any human residence in that wild place, but obviously he was mistaken. Bolan's outfit had no dog following them. He turned, rode into a dense thicket, dismounted and tethered his horse. Here was the battle ground, and he had to reconnoiter a bit. Creeping through the bushes, he reached the foot of the hill at the east side of the cove, and climbing cautiously to a higher place, he peered out.

There, before him, lay a miniature world. High bluffs and steep hills surrounded the cove. The stream wound through it. A tiny field was in the bend of the creek, and, beyond it, was a cabin of two or three rooms, some small outbuildings, and a stable and pens.

Breck got out his glasses. He could plainly make out Bolan, Hosman, and Gaynor, whom he knew only by description, and another man, all standing in a group at the gate of the pens.

Hosman and the stranger, who was clearly the man of the house, seemed to be talking and gesticulating violently. Gale Gaynor was nowhere in sight.

AS A MATTER of fact, the man talking to Hosman was Whisky Dick, and he was talking quite plainly.

"You fellers neenter unsaddle," he said, " 'cause you gotter get to hell out'n here. I got my little business here, and I don't bother nobody. If one of you fellers come across the ridge at night when I'm a little slow about bringing the stuff out, that's all right. But this time you've come in the front door, and prob'ly left it open. Mount, and get to hell outer here!"

"Now, see here, Dick," protested Hosman, "don't you go and git too British. Them marshals is on our trail. Us fellers here in the Kimish has got to hang together. If we don't, were dang likely to hang separately, as the feller says. We ain't goin' out of here until night. You're goin' to give us something to eat, and give me a chance to doctor this shotten laig. Then when night comes——"

"I ain't goin' to do no sech damn thing," snarled Dick. "Mount and ride while you can."

The breed's face went dark, and he changed from his begging tone to one that was hard as iron.

"That'll be enough of that damn nonsense," he grated. "They's two of us and only one of you, and——"

"Two of you? They's three, if I can count. Not only that, you've brung a woman in here. Ain't ary damn woman on earth that ain't got a tongue a mile long. I'd as well advertise in the papers that I make corn juice, if she stay's here ontel night. I tend to my own business and don't bother you fellows, and I don't aim to have no gang of damn horsethiefs and cold killers interferin' with my affairs. Mount and ride, I tell you, while——"

Peering through his glasses, Breck saw a puff of white smoke, saw Whisky Dick throw up his hands and fall, and then he heard the echoing report of a gun. A moment afterward, he swung his glasses to the house and saw Gale Gaynor standing in the cabin door, looking toward the men. She stood there for a moment, then turned back into the cabin. The three men put the horses in the pen, and he saw them shuck corn to feed them. After that, they went toward the house. A little later he saw smoke coming from the stovepipe. Bolan and Hosman were calmly preparing to cook a meal for their party.

Breck swept the wild escarpment around the little cove with his glasses. He could make out but one place where a horseman might climb out of the place, and it would be a daring rider who would undertake that. Indeed, there were few places where one might climb out on foot. He was pitted with these desperate men. No one of them could outshoot him, with either pistol or rifle, for he had won contests until he was barred at every club in the country where he grew up.

But trick shooting was one thing, and cold-blooded killing was something else. He had seen Hosman murder the whisky peddler with no more compunction than if he had been a dog. He shuddered at the thought. He wondered why they hadn't killed him, Breck, the night before, stead of merely knocking him out. He dn't know that Hosman had wanted to e a knife on him, since they were afraid shoot, and that only Bolan's frenzy of ste to get away with the girl, and the lief that Blake would finish the job, had evented him from doing it.

At last Breck pocketed his glasses and ole back to where he had left his horse. e had a picture of that cove in his mind. he best way to reach the cabin without ing seen was to follow the fringe of mber and brush along the creek. Reaching his horse, he ate the remainder of his ttle store of food. A man couldn't work an empty stomach, and he had a job ead of him. He might get killed, and didn't want to be so hungry that he'd ve to ask for a handout before he could s through the pearly gates. He grinned the thought, and went on munching his od. He was laying his plans, including the deliberate shooting of men—a ing he had never done. He believed that ses where an officer of the law had to oot a man were very rare. He could e, though, that this was one of those tuations, and that he'd have to look arp, or get killed himself.

CHAPTER V

THE FIFTH DAY

'T WAS the fifth day after the killing at Mike Leedy's place in Fort Smith. Breck had spent his first night at the uatter's cabin. The second night, at e trail crossing on the Whitebead road. he third night, in the flat woods near e crossing of the Blue. The fourth ght he had spent following his quarry Whisky Dick's den. There was a fine ospect that he'd spend the fifth one in eaven.

During that time, Breck had done conderable thinking, and had learned some ings about manhunting. He had discovered that his theories of the game were l wrong. He had also found that he was w in the hard school of experience, and at he had missed the primary grades and en thrown headlong into the graduating ss, without preparation, and relying on ad luck to save his skin whole and unnctured. These things were running rough his mind as he munched his bit of cold food to stiffen his back and fortify his nerve for what was ahead of him.

Meantime, there had been considerable thinking in another quarter. Joe Tybee had expected Breck to lose the trail and be back at his office within three days, at the outside. When Breck didn't return at the end of the third day, Tybee went wild. He had said his sister would never forgive him if anything happened to Breck. The fact was, he knew he'd never forgive himself, for he loved the boy as if he were his own son.

While Breck was peering through his glasses and watching Hosman commit cold murder, Old Kiel Gray was standing in the door of his little store, chewing the stem of an old black pipe and cursing in a slow and steady undertone, as if he meant to continue all day.

"Where in the hell did that boy go?" he demanded of the world in general, and without waiting for an answer to that question, went on asking: "What the hell did Joe Tybee mean by sending him on such a trip alone? Why the hell didn't Joe send a posse to join the boy and help him out?"

He got an answer to the last one, for three grim, hard faced riders, armed for war, came jingling down the rocky hill and drew up at the store.

"Hello, Welsh! Howdy, boys," greeted Gray. "Time you fellers was getting on the job."

"Well, we're here, ain't we?" growled Welsh.

"Yes, you're here, but you're about four days too late, and Joe Tybee prob'ly lacks one of having as many nephews as he had. What the hell did Joe mean, anyway? Looked like a nice young feller to me, but you prob'ly won't even find his body."

"Maybe not," said Welsh. "If it was his time to go, he's went. If it wasn't, we'll maybe find him."

Mr. Welsh was a fatalist. He had to be one to go the places he went, do the things he did, and take the chances he took. He was near fifty years old, gray as a badger, and hard as iron. He had ridden so much that his legs looked like a pair of hames, and had gripped a gun so much that his fingers were crooked and hard like the claws of a bird. His steely gray eyes never changed expression, no matter what he saw or heard.

"You might tell us what little you know," he now said to Gray.

"I don't know anything," snapped Gray. "I've been a good friend to Joe Tybee ever since he's been marshal of this district, and I've helped him a lot of times, but I aim to shoot him the first time I see him for——"

"That's all right with me," interrupted Welsh. "I don't give a damn how many times you shoot the chief. Tell me what you know about Breck and the gang he's after."

"All I know is that Rod Bolan and a breed named Hosman stops here about noon one day. They got a man and woman with 'em, and I reck'n are heading for Walnut Springs. Next day, about the same time, a young fellow rides in here and gives me a letter from Joe Tybee. The letter says this boy is Joe's nevvy, and he's on the trail of Bolan and Hosman, and will I help him all I can."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I sent him out the Whitebead road to the north and south trail, and told him to go to the crossing on the Blue and wait. I said that Bolan and his outfit were prob'ly on the way to the Arbuckles, and he'd head 'em off there and stop him."

"Lied to him, didn't you?"

"Shore I lied to him! Done it to save his hide. You know they ain't no one man on the force that's got any business meeting Bolan and Hosman in the road. They're two of the coldest killers the Kimish ever knew."

"Yes, they're bad, but you ain't helped us much to find either Bolan's outfit or the boy. Breck may be up there at the crossing of the Blue, and he may not. We got a pretty good idea where Bolan's apt to be. We'll go after him first. If the boy ain't dead, we can hunt him up later. If he is dead, it won't make no difference when we find him." And swinging to their saddles, the three marshals rode away.

Old Kiel Gray took up his job of cursing where he had left off, and with Welsh and his two men for new objects of wrath, he went on without a break.

MEANTIME, Breck Cahill, thirty miles away, and unaware that there was any other upholder of law and order within a hundred miles of him, examined his guns, saw that they were loaded and working, and set forward to work his way unseen up that creek to where he could get a look at the cabin. There was one factor that he distrusted. That was the dog he had heard bark. If it discovered him, it might cause trouble. That dog was going to be a help, rather than a hindrance.

Creeping along under the bushes, sometimes in the edge of the water, Breck won his way half a mile, and to within a hundred yards of the house. By that time it was past noon, and he was west of the house. That would help when it came to shooting. The light would be at his back, and in the other fellow's face. Breck crouched in a thick clump of bushes and peered out.

The ground between his thicket and the cabin was bare and rocky, and there was no fence around the house. It was fine, open ground to charge across, but Breck had another idea. Charging three armed men, and them in a house, didn't look wise to him. He had reversed his ideas of the majesty of the Law within the last few hours. He'd been shot at as coolly as if he had been a wolf. He had seen Hosman commit a murder, as if he had been brushing a fly out of the way. He was laboring under no delusions now.

The wind was blowing from the south Breck could see the big hound and masti mongrel prowling around the cabin, with its hackles half raised, as if it knew something was wrong. There was no other sign of life about the place. For an hour, he sat in the bushes, peering out cautiously. Then the wind stopped blowing a moment, and the next puff came from the west. The dog was lying down, but i sprang up, sniffed the breeze a moment, then let out a bellowing note. Instantly, the three men ran out the door, and stopped in a bunch.

"Huh! Varmint of some kind, I reck'n," said Bolan.

"Varmint, hell!" growled Hosman, reaching for his gun. "A dog don't bark tha way at a varmint. Sic 'em, Bulger."

The dog made a few stiff-legged, snarling jumps toward the thicket. A rifl cracked, Hosman spun half around, an fell. It was a moment before Bolan recovered from his surprise, sprang into th house, and poured a shower of shots int the thicket. Breck wasn't there. He ha lled behind the bole of an immense twin ee, and was peering through the tiny ack between the trunks.

He had made the mistake of his life hen he didn't shoot at Bolan, and shoot kill. He hadn't done it because he idn't want to kill Bolan. He didn't want kill any of them, in fact, but he parcularly wanted to see Mr. Bolan hanged y the neck until he was exceedingly dead. t wasn't the impersonal attitude of a ood officer, but subconsciously, Breck had personal matter against Bolan.

Any hopes he may have had about Gale aynor were dead, since the girl had led im into that trap the night before. The ing was that if Bolan hadn't interfered, e and the girl would both still have been Fort Smith. Breck didn't realize at e moment what had actuated him in ooting Hosman instead of Bolan, and a oment later he was thinking of something se.

"Come back here, damn your cowardly uls!" yelled Hosman. "Help me into e house."

Breck saw Gaynor spring out the door d lay hold of Hosman, and he saw mething else that Gaynor couldn't see. here was a door at the back of the cabin, d he saw Bolan step out that door, holdg Gale Gaynor by the arm, and run ith her toward the high bluff at the back the house, and not more than fifty ards away. With two springs Breck had e cabin between him and the fleeing olan, and was running toward the house. aynor heard him coming and looked up to the muzzle of his gun.

"Up with 'em," snapped Breck, sharp d hard, and the gambler's hands went bove his head. "Don't touch it!" he napped out, as Hosman's left hand crept cross toward his gun, and stooping ickly, he snatched the gun from the lster, and threw it out of reach. Then king a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, e locked one to Hosman's left wrist and dered Gaynor to stand closer.

"Now lock that other cuff on your kle!" he commanded.

"But I have to carry him into the bin," protested Gaynor.

"I don't care whether you carry him in not," rapped Breck. "Do as I tell you d do it quick!"

The handcuff clicked home, and Breck shot around the corner of the cabin. A gun cracked, and a bullet struck the wall level with his head, and he stepped back.

"Who's that?" asked Gaynor.

"Your friend, Mr. Bolan, I think? You'd better get Hosman in the house before he gets hit worse than he is."

Hosman got up on his knees, which was as far as he could rise without tripping Gaynor. His right shoulder was soaked in blood. Breck knew exactly where the bullet was. He had put it there as coolly as ever he shot at a target. It might bleed a little, but it wouldn't kill him. Leaving Gaynor and Hosman to do the best they could, Breck backed away from the cabin, keeping it between him and the point where Bolan's bullet had come from, then turning, he sprang for the timber, where he had left his rifle. There was another shot, and the bullet whined by his ear.

BRECK regained the timber and picked up his rifle. He had only Bolan to fight now. Gaynor and Hosman were helpless. Let Mr. Bolan only show a trace of himself now. But Bolan was a wise fighter. The minutes dragged on into half an hour, and there was not a movement. Then Gaynor called from the cabin door.

"You're young Cahill, Joe Tybee's nephew, aren't you?"

"Well, what of it?" replied Breck.

"My God, man, be human! That hellion has got my daughter and has gone with her."

"He hasn't gone far."

"But she's with him!"

"You gave her to him, didn't you?"

"No! If you've got any human in your make-up, turn me loose, and let me go to my daughter."

"Oh, no. That won't work. You think Bolan will get me as I come to the cabin, but he won't. I'm not coming. I don't think Bolan will harm your daughter. He's too busy."

Breck was talking to Gaynor, but keeping his eyes on the bluff at the back of the house. He saw Gale Gaynor spring from behind a jutting point of rock and saw Bolan catch her arm and jerk her back. A moment later he heard a stifled scream.

Breck had the outlaw located now, but it would be nothing short of suicide to try to go to him. It was going to be a waiting game. From the cabin door, Gaynor begged and pleaded, and when Breck wouldn't yield, he cursed him in impotent rage. Breck had plenty of reasons for not complying with the request. In the first place, he'd get shot if he tried to go to that cabin, which was probably what Gaynor wanted. In the next place, he wanted all this gang. He had two, and he didn't mean to turn them loose.

Besides all that, if he should turn Gaynor loose now, Bolan would kill him if he started to his daughter. Whatever else Bolan might think of the girl, just now she was his shield and life-preserver, and he didn't mean to give her up. Twenty-four hours before that moment, Breck would have been frantic at the thought of Gale being in Bolan's hands. He meant to take Bolan alive, and he meant to see him hanged. His animosity toward the outlaw was largely on account of Gale, but he didn't realize it. It didn't occur to him that he didn't feel the same way toward Hosman and Gaynor.

The minutes dragged on and Breck was getting restless. The sun would set after a while, and he had to come to grips with Bolan before it got dark. Gaynor continued to beg and plead from the cabin door, while Hosman cursed him roundly from the floor, where he lay. It got on Breck's nerves, and he moved away farther up the creek bank, but still where he could watch the place where he had seen Gale and Bolan.

He had wondered that morning that he could see no place where the creek came into the cove. He discovered now that it came out of the bluff in a huge, roaring spring that broke from a great, overhanging cave. He didn't know then that Whisky Dick's still was there, but he learned that it was no place for him when a pistol shot roared somewhere from the rocks, and a bullet passed under his left arm and scorched across his ribs.

Breck crawled back to the safety of the trees, from where he could see the bluff all around the upper end of the cove. There was but one place where it would be possible to get out, and that was through a big crevice at the east side. All Breck could do was to watch the bluff, from where Bolan and the girl were hid to the rough steps that led to the crevice, and he set himself to do that. As soon as it got dark, he meant to creep around to the crevice himself, and have it out with Bolan there.

The sun had gone behind the mountain, and it was twilight in the gorge. Gaynor called and kept calling until Breck had to answer to keep from going crazy. When he did, Gaynor said, in humble, pleading tones:

"Mr. Cahill, I have twenty thousand dollars in a bank in Fort Smith. I'll give you a check for all of it, and give you my parole not to even try to escape, if you'll turn me loose and let me go to my daughter."

"And I wouldn't try to come to that cabin right now for twenty million."

"You can come to it the way you left it. Get it between you and Bolan. Come on, please. For God's sake, be human once, if you are a marshal."

"No, I tell you. I'm busy."

With that Gaynor seemed to give up in despair.

There was one terrible thing in this world that had not come to Breck Cahill's knowledge. He couldn't have conceived it, if he had been told of it. That thing was the anguish of a father, chained within hearing of his daughter that he loved, hearing her one muffled cry of anguish, and not knowing what happened after that. Breck might have understood enough to realize how maddening it must be to Gaynor, if he hadn't become convinced that Gaynor and his daughter belonged to Bolan's gang. That, and the fact that he thought Bolan would kill Gaynor in order to keep the girl as a shield for himself, kept Breck from listening to the man's entreaties.

So, while Breck was watching the bluff as a cat watches a mouse, a frightful tragedy was going on in the house. Hosman, who had been willing enough to kill Gaynor, and had insisted on it several times, found himself chained by the only hand he could use to the foot of a raving madman. Gaynor had long since realized that he was a prisoner, and now he had no other feeling than hatred for the men who had tricked him.

Suddenly, Breck heard one wild, hoarse cry in the cabin and then silence. He didn't know what had happened. He couldn't have conceived it. Some terrible thing, undoubtedly, to wring such a cry terror from a human throat. He had time to think further of it, for at the y instant that the cry died out, a move- nt on the face of the bluff caught his ; and his blood froze in horror. All ught of what was going on in the cabin s banished from his mind, like the snuff- out of a candle.

CHAPTER VI

"HERE ARE YOUR BRACELETS, LADY"

THE bluff across the upper end of the cove, and just back of Whisky Dick's house, was five hundred feet g and about a hundred feet high. West the point where the creek came from der it in a great, gushing spring, the ff was a sheer wall of stone. From at point east for three hundred feet, it oked as if a thick layer had been split f the front of it by some ancient cata- ysm, and at the base lay the riven and gged stone in a heap thirty feet wide ainst the foot of the cliff, with chambers d passages all among it. It was in ese hidden crannies that Bolan had been ding all afternoon, keeping a watch on e cabin and shooting at Breck Cahill henever opportunity offered. Since his llet had burnt Breck's side, that young an had kept safely out of the way.

Halfway up the bluff, and twenty feet ove the jagged rick of stone at its base, narrow shelf extended along the face of e cliff. In places it was not more than foot wide. At the east end of the shelf, here it ended at a broad crevice that n back into the mountain, the shelf read to ten feet wide. From the edge of is wider shelf the ground was a steep ope that one could climb. Crude steps d been made in it, leading to the crevice, hich was obviously the way out across e mountain and on to Walnut Springs. om the end of that narrow shelf, across e broader space to the mouth of the evice, was not more than three or four d steps.

The movement on the face of the bluff t Breck had seen was Bolan righting mself on the ledge, after scrambling up it behind the stacked-up stone. He was no danger of being shot, for he had le Gaynor in his arms and was holding r body, now limp with terror.

He carried her in such a position that her body was a shield to his own, and on his face, set out in relief against the gray stones of the cliff by the twilight glow, was a snarling grin of derision. He knew he was safe. No one would chance a shot at him. There was an even chance that the bullet would hit the girl, but that was not his chief reliance. If he was hit, or even threatened, he'd drop the girl and she'd be dashed to death on the jagged stones below. Since the night before, Bolan had been sure that this man who had followed them was merely some lover of Gale's. He had cursed himself bitterly many times that he had not let Hosman finish him there in the cave. He had also cursed Sam Blake for not going at once and completing the job. But all that was past now. Bolan's job was to reach the mouth of that crevice. Then he would escape to Walnut Springs, and take the girl with him—if she were still alive, which seemed doubtful.

Bolan had never yet had more than a glimpse of Breck, and that was when he aimed at his heart and missed by a few inches. Even then, he didn't see the young man's face. He knew his name, for Gale had called it again and again back in the cavern, where he took her after they heard her last scream. It had meant nothing to him, for he didn't know who Breck Cahill was, but it had told him that the girl was relying on Breck to rescue her, and there was that in her tone which indicated to him that this man was more to her than some passing friend. This reassured him that the man was merely a sweetheart of the girl, and that they had safely dodged the marshals.

He looked about after righting himself on that dangerous ledge. He hoped and believed Breck was watching him. He couldn't think of a sweeter torture than it would be for the young man to stand helpless and see him escape with the girl. But Breck was not in sight. It was Bolan's hope that Breck was watching that caused his hideous grin, as he began inching along the shelf toward the crevice and safety.

BRECK saw. Ah, yes, he saw. And it chilled the very marrow in his bones. These men he was hunting were not human. He looked through his rifle sights, knew he could easily put a bullet through Bolan's head, above the girl's body, but he dared not shoot. Anyway, he didn't want to kill Bolan. He wanted to see the inhuman monster hang. Darting swiftly around the cabin and outhouses, which were now in deep dusk, he gained a hiding place in a cluster of young trees to the east of the cabin and about two hundred feet from where the steps went up to the crevice. Here he crouched and waited for what seemed to be an eternity.

It was already deep dusk in the cove, but the twilight held up there on the face of the bluff, and he prayed that it would hold yet a little longer. Bolan still wore his fiendish grin, as he moved swiftly where the ledge was wider and crept along the narrow places inch by inch. The shadows had crept to Bolan's feet. A few more minutes, and he and the swooning girl would be in darkness. His arms were cramped and weakened with the burden of the swooning girl. He took a new grip and hitched her higher in his arms, stepped off the shelf onto the wide place at the mouth of the crevice. He took a step, two steps, and his heart bounded with hope.

Cr-r-ack!

Breck Cahill's rifle broke the terrible stillness that had seemed to last for ages. It was as if he had pressed a magic button. Bolan collapsed to the ground. The fall broke his hold on Gale and threw her from him. Over the brink she bounded and came whirling down the steep slope by the side of the steps. Out of the gloom shot a figure and caught her up in his arms. But it was not Breck Cahill, though he saw it all. It was Fleet Gaynor, the gambler!

Bolan sat up and began moving toward the crevice.

"Stop, Bolan!" commanded Breck. "I don't want to kill you, but if you move toward that crevice again, I'll do it! Throw your gun down."

Bolan swung his arm and the gun came bounding down the slope.

"You've got another gun. Throw it down, too."

The second gun came down.

"Is that all you have?" called Breck.

"Yes," snarled Bolan. "What do you think I am? A hardware store?"

"You're hard all right," replied Breck grimly. "Now roll off."

"I can't. This leg hurts like hell."

"The young lady came down that way. I'm going to count, and at three I'll fire. One—two——"

Bolan rolled off the ledge and came whirling down to the level ground. He stopped and sat up dizzily.

"Put these on," said Breck. "I guess you've worn them before." And he threw a pair of handcuffs to Bolan, who put them on his own wrists without a word. Breck stooped and drew them a notch tighter, then stood up. Twenty feet away stood Fleet Gaynor, with his daughter in his arms. She had come out of her swoon, and was standing, leaning against her father.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Gaynor," said Breck, as he stooped and unlocked a handcuff from Gaynor's leg. "We'll put these on your wrists. It will be more convenient."

Gaynor held out his hands, and as the cuffs clicked home, he said, in a husky voice:

"All right, Mr. Cahill. You've saved my little girl from worse than death. You can do anything you please with me."

"I'm not going to do anything with you except take you back to Fort Smith."

"That'll be all right. I wish I'd never left there." And there was a note of relief in his voice.

"Here are your bracelets, lady," said Breck, grimly, as Gale stood holding to her father's arm.

"Why—what—what do you mean?" she faltered.

"It isn't hard to understand. I mean to put these handcuffs on you. You've led me into one trap. You won't lead me into another."

"I—I didn't——"

"Put them on, daughter," said Gaynor gently. "Mr. Cahill has the authority of the law for what he is doing. Anyway, we owe him obedience for what he has, perhaps unintentionally, done for us."

The silence was so great that the clicking of the cuffs sounded like pistol shots as they closed on her soft, round wrists. Breck Cahill would remember that moment as long as he lived.

"Now we'll go back to the cabin," he said tersely. "Come on, Bolan. You've got one good leg, and I'll help you along."

Bolan got up on his good leg, and

leaning on Breck, hopped off toward the cabin, which was a hundred yards away, while Gaynor and Gale walked on ahead of them. At the cabin door, Breck said:

"Lean against the wall, Bolan, until I make a light."

Breck struck a match and stepped into the dark cabin. An old brass coal oil lamp stood on a table, and he applied the match to it. The red flame, with its spiral of smoke at the top, cast a murky light over the place. Breck looked down and started violently. Things had happened so fast that he hadn't wondered how Gaynor got loose. Now, he saw. On the floor, in the middle of the room, and almost at his feet, lay the body of Hosman. He had been choked to death. And Gaynor's escape was quickly explained. Hosman's left hand was severed at the wrist; the manacle that had bound the two men was dangling from Gaynor's leg. The gambler had gone to the rescue of his daughter.

Breck had intended to get some food for himself and his prisoners, for he was pretty well spent and felt that he hadn't slept for ages, but now, he wanted nothing to eat. He wanted to get out of that accursed cove with all possible dispatch.

"Wait here until I bring the horses," he said, as he stepped out of the cabin door. No one else spoke and he staggered on toward the pens.

When he brought up the four saddled horses, he went up to Gaynor.

"I'll have to ask you for a little help, Mr. Gaynor," Breck said, and stooping down, he made to lift Hosman's body.

"Why—why—you're not going to take him!" gasped Gaynor, his face going white.

"Yes. I came after him, and I mean to take him—all of him."

Gaynor was trembling like a leaf, as he helped, with manacled hands, to put Hosman's body across the saddle and lash it there. He had killed this man. He was mad with anxiety at the time, but the courts might call it murder in spite of the fact that Hosman was conspiring with Bolan against him and his daughter.

"All right, Bolan!" snapped Breck. "Up you go. Let's get away from here."

"I can't ride with this leg hanging," growled Bolan.

"Better do that than to ride like Hosman is riding. Come on."

Bolan was boosted to his saddle, the wounded leg, which was shattered just below the knee, dangling limply by the stirrup. Gale Gaynor shuddered at the hard, rasping voice of this man whom she had thought to be so kind and gentle. She felt the steel on her wrists, and went hot and cold by flashes.

"Please mount, Miss Gaynor," said Breck, coldly, but offered no assistance. Gaynor helped her to her saddle, then mounted his own horse. The animals were fastened together, with Gaynor in the lead, Gale next, then Bolan, and Hosman's body on the last horse. Breck led them down the trail, on foot, toward the lower end of the cove, where he had left his own horse and where he meant to take them out by the way of the fall.

AS THEY moved down the little valley, Bolan was doing some rapid thinking. The first intimation he had that Breck Cahill was a marshal was when he had put the handcuffs on his wrists. Since then, Bolan had spoken but one time. He had protested that he couldn't ride with that wounded leg, for a purpose. Now, as he rode along, he managed to get the wounded foot into the stirrup. This eased the strain on it, and he began to plan.

This young fool thought he was going to take him to Fort Smith and put him in jail. He guessed not. There was no one man on the marshal's force that could take this layout out of the Kimish country. True they were only in the edge of it, but there were suburbs to the Cities of Refuge. They wouldn't go five miles after leaving the cove until they met someone. Barring that, he'd find a way to get his horse loose from that trail outfit, and even with manacled hands, he could lose himself in that black bottom and find someone to set him free. There'd be a hundred chances.

If they all failed, he still wouldn't go to Fort Smith. The only cell they'd put him in would be virtually a death cell. A dozen crimes were charged to him, any of which would break his neck, and the killing of Haines and Webster was a cinch against him. He didn't regret it. He had killed them to keep them from testifying against a pal. His only regret was that he hadn't killed Gaynor, as Hosman had wanted to do. If they had done that, Hosman would have been alive now and they could have been well out of the country.

That girl, riding quietly along, was the cause of the whole trouble. He had seen her twice on the street, and learned who she was. Then had come the diabolical scheme to frame Gaynor and get him and his daughter across into the Indian country. He had supposed Breck Cahill to be her sweetheart, but he had been mistaken. There she was, riding along there, with the cold steel on her wrists, when she was guilty of nothing but keeping bad company. Bolan's meditations were interrupted by the cavalcade coming to a halt.

Breck found his horse and joined them a few minutes later. As he mounted and took the bridle of Gaynor's horse, he said:

"You all know the kind of gate there is to this place. Sit steady and be careful. The water below that fall is deep and swift. Your horses are all fastened together, bridle to tail. If one goes you all go."

Gale Gaynor shivered at the cold, matter of fact tone in which the warning was issued, as they rode into the shallow water at the head of the gorge and started on toward the fall. She remembered the place and how it had sent a chill through her that morning, as they had passed the narrow shelf by the side of the fall, with the swift water swirling and gurgling about the horse's feet. One misstep, only a little too far to the right, and the swift water would snatch a horse's feet from under it and send it headlong into the smother of foam on the rocks below. The roar of the fall was about them now, and she could see the break of the water, glinting in the starlight. She was faint and dizzy. She must keep her saddle. She gripped the saddle horn with her manacled hands just as Bolan uttered a bloodcurdling yell that echoed and reechoed above the roar of the fall.

CHAPTER VII

SHACKLES THAT BIND FOR LIFE

OLD WELSH hunted wild men in very much the same way that he would have hunted wild hogs. He generally got meat when he hunted, and he took along a means of carrying it. Soon after he and his posse left Gray's Store that morning, a wagon came lurching down the hill, drawn by four mules. The bows had a deep rake to front and rear, and on the side of the cover were the letters, "U. S. M." It trundled on by, and Gray cursed it for a creeper and swore it would have but one passenger, and him dead, as it came back.

When Welsh set out to take one of the Cities of Refuge apart and clean it, as he was preparing to do now, he was very methodical about it. He made his camp in the suburbs and worked from it. So it chanced that the long, rakish wagon stood near the bank of Fall Creek, where the road crossed it. A huge campfire was built near, and the negro cook's eyes and his white teeth were gleaming in the firelight, as he went about preparing supper for the men. Welsh and his two men had just come in after a day's hard riding in which they had been unable to find a trace of the men they sought.

"Looks like them two hellions got clean out of the country," said Welsh, as he sat down wearily on a bed roll. "Damn Kid Gray's cranky soul. He may have been nearer right than he thought he was. They might have headed out for the Arbuckles, but— What the hell was that? Did you hear it?"

"Yes," said one of the men. "It was somebody yelled."

"Shore it was, but did you notice what kind of yell."

"Yes, it was a sorty war whoop up to'ds the fall."

"That's what it was, and it was putting the rough boys on notice that they's business afoot. I wouldn't wonder we have to ride some more tonight, yet."

Now, when Bolan uttered that yell, he had two things in mind. One was that if any of his clansmen were in hearing, it would warn them that he was in the neighborhood and in trouble. The main reason, however, was one of sheer, immediate fear. He could see Gale's horse immediately in front of him, and could see that it was perilously near the swift water, which was to their right, as they hugged the left bank. His right leg was his sound one, and he was kicking his horse with it to keep it over to the bank. He knew the yell would cause Gale's horse to jump forward before it got into such a depth that it couldn't jump, and he was right. Had he not frightened the horse, at that moment, the whole cavalcade would probably have gone over the fall together, with little chance of any of them coming out alive.

The vagaries of the human mind are strange. Here was Bolan, who had faced death every day and carried his life in his hands everywhere he rode, frightened as a child or woman at roaring water and a chance of drowning. But then, Mr. Bolan had decided how he was going to escape. His hands were manacled, but in his hurry Breck had neglected to fasten them to the saddle horn. A few miles farther on in that black bottom, Bolan would simply throw his good leg over the saddle, fall off into the brush, and with his other prisoners to watch, Breck would never find him in that dense forest. It was a sane enough plan, but there were things Bolan didn't know.

"NOW, what the devil is that?" growled Welsh, as horses came splashing down the creek in the shallow water.

"Horses, five of 'em, and somebody on 'em," replied the man he had spoken to, as the string of animals came into the dim circle of light from the campfire.

"Hello, Breck!" yelled Welsh, with a pæan of joy in his voice. "Where'd you come from and what you got here?"

"I came down this creek and I've got some prisoners," said Breck. "Also, I'm about all in, and you fellows will have to take care of them." And swinging from his saddle, Cahill slumped down on the bed roll.

"Hello, Gaynor! I didn't know you were a deputy marshal." And then as Gaynor dismounted and he saw the light glint on his handcuffs, "Why, what the hell are you doin' with wristlets on yo' arms!"

"Mr. Cahill put them on me," replied Gaynor calmly.

"And Miss Gale, too! Why, Breck, what's the matter with you? Get them keys out here."

"I have a warrant for them in my pocket," protested Breck, doggedly, cold misery in every tone of his voice.

"That's all right. They's some mistake. Gimme the keys. I'll stand good for 'em."

Breck dragged the keys from his pocket and passed them over to Welsh. The other two men, knowing Gaynor and his daughter well, crowded up to assist in liberating them.

"Look out! Stop him!" yelled Welsh.

A gun cracked and Bolan was stopped for all time. The men had been untying the bridles from the tails of the horses when they quit the job and ran to where Gaynor and his daughter stood. Seeing his chance, Bolan, who had not been helped from his horse and couldn't dismount alone, made a bolt for liberty. One of the deputies had sent a bullet square through his heart.

"Just as well," said Welsh. "I reck'n he expected it. Better than hanging, and his rope was already twisted. You and Miss Gale can take my tent, Mr. Gaynor. You'll find water and a washbasin and towels in there. Just make yourselves at home."

Gaynor and the girl passed into the tent and dropped the flap. The other deputies had laid Bolan's body on the ground, a little way from the camp, then unlashing the body of Hosman, they laid it by the side of Bolan.

"Gosh! That must have been some battle!" said one of the deputies. "One of Hosman's hands is shot clean off."

Old Welsh shot a quick look at Breck, then said:

"Breck, let's you and me step off here and talk a little bit."

Breck Cahill forced himself wearily to his feet, and they went to the outer edge of the circle of firelight. There they squatted on the ground.

"Now tell me all about it," said Welsh.

"There's not much to tell. I took four prisoners and you have turned two of them loose."

"Aw, hell, Breck! Get that out of your head. That crazy warrant you got is all wrong. It was shown clearly at the coroner's inquest that Bolan and Hosman killed Haines and Webster, and Gaynor had nothing to do with it. They gave you that warrant before the inquest, and supposed Gaynor was guilty because he left town with those fellows."

"Gaynor may be innocent of that, but he's a murderer just the same."

"Murderer. What do you mean?"

"He killed Hosman."

"Suppose he did. I've killed a few like Hosman myself, and nobody ever called me a murderer. It's to Gaynor's credit that he shot Hosman."

"He didn't shoot Hosman. I shot him myself and wounded him. Then I handcuffed Gaynor and Hosman together and left them in Whisky Dick's cabin. Hosman's left arm was cuffed to Gaynor's foot, and his right arm was useless. Gaynor choked Hosman to death, then severed his hand so he could get clear."

"My God, boy! What are you trying to tell me? Are you clear out of your head?"

"No. I'm not out of my head. I'm telling you the truth. Go look for yourself."

Welsh went to where the two bodies lay. He struck two matches and took two looks, then went back to Breck.

"Now, see here, Breck," he said, "there's something back of all this. What in the hell ever made a nice, easygoing fellow like Fleet Gaynor do a thing like that?"

Breck told what the situation was. Told about the stifled cry from Gale, and about Gaynor begging to be turned loose.

"Why didn't you turn him loose?"

"Two reasons. Gaynor was my prisoner, and I didn't know but what it was a trick to get away. Another thing: Bolan would have killed Gaynor if he had tried to go to the girl." Then Breck went on and told the whole story just as it happened. When he had finished, Old Welsh nodded his grizzled head and said:

"I see, I see. You ain't quite old enough, son, to understand what a hell's torment Fleet Gaynor was in. I got a little girl. She ain't quite grown yet. If I was in Fleet Gaynor's place, well—I ain't saying what I might do. There'll come a time when you'll love somebody like that. Anyway, it was either Gaynor's fingers or a rope for Hosman. He had it coming."

They sat a long minute in silence. Breck was doing some serious thinking. At last, Old Welsh spoke:

"Let me handle this, Breck. We'll make two reports. One for the public: That I met up with you; that you had Bolan under arrest and turned him over to me; that he tried to escape and one of my men killed him; that Hosman was killed while resisting arrest. That'll do for one report. Then you and me together will just tell Joe Tybee the truth about the matter. Fleet Gaynor ain't no more a murderer than you or me. What say?"

"All right if you think that's best, but——"

"What is it?"

"If you take Hosman's body back in the condition it's in there'll be some questions asked that may be hard to answer."

"No, there won't. There's a reward out for both those fellows, dead or alive, but I'm going to bury 'em right now, tonight. If they don't want to take my word for it, they can go to hell with the reward."

"All right, but you fellows will have to dig the grave. My side hurts pretty bad."

"Your side? What's the matter with your side?"

"Bolan shot me."

"Shot you! Good Lord! Do you want to die of lockjaw? Come on here." And he dragged Breck toward his tent, just as Gaynor and Gale came out and sat down near the fire. "Sorry, folks, but I got to use this tent a while. Bring me a pan of hot water, Abe, and the medicine box out of the wagon."

Breck's wound was slight. The skin was burnt, and there was a slight open wound an inch long over one rib. Ten minutes later it was carefully cleaned, and then Welsh poured into it a lotion that burnt like liquid fire. Fleet Gaynor had done most of the surgery, and had done it deftly.

THEY had supper, and during the meal, Gaynor told Old Welsh that he had been forced to leave Fort Smith and take his daughter with him; that Bolan and Hosman had told him he'd be killed if he testified against Bud Starr and had promised to take them to the railroad and put them on the train if they'd leave the country. As soon as they were across the river, they found that they were virtually prisoners, and remained so until that night. Even Gaynor didn't know the full extent of Bolan's villainy, and his intention to murder him and steal his daughter as soon as he could reach a place where it would be safe. Lying on his cot in the tent, Breck heard all this, and he began to understand a good many things.

Welsh, Gaynor, the other men, even the cook, took a lantern and went off to dig a grave. Gale Gaynor sat for a while looking into the fire, then she got up and stole over to the tent. She went in and knelt down by that cot, hiding her face.

"Oh, Mr. Cahill, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you!" replied Breck. "It is I who must ask forgiveness."

"No, no, no. You didn't understand."

"I understood one thing all the time, and that was that I loved you, and yet I handcuffed you like a common prisoner."

"That's all right, Breck," and she looked up at him through tear filled eyes. "All shackles are not dishonorable."

"No, and here's one that I hope will bind you for life." And putting his arm around her, he pulled her head down on his breast.

It was afternoon of the next day that Old Welsh and his posse, with Breck Cahill, Gaynor and Gale, arrived at Gray's Store. A few minutes later, Breck, Gale, and Fleet Gaynor took the road to Fort Smith.

"Where's yo' waggin and yo' prisoners?" asked Old Kiel Gray.

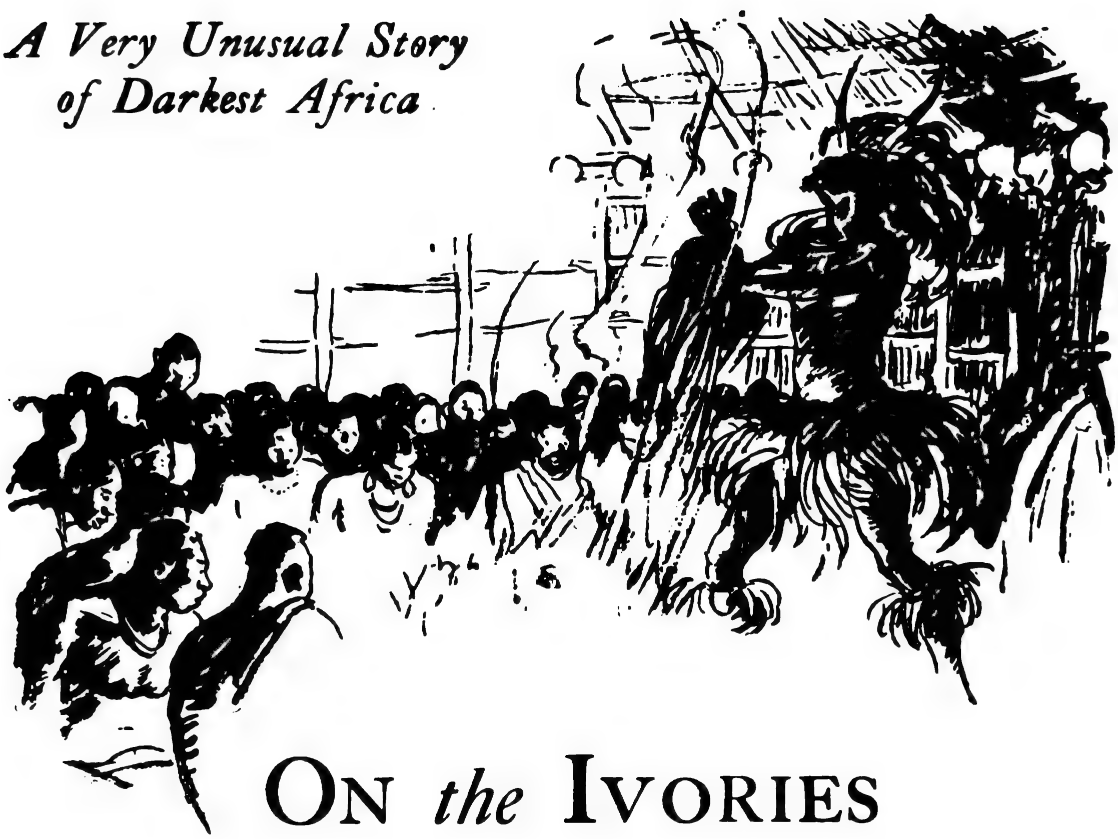
"Waggin's gone to the crossing of the Blue," said Welsh. "They're laying the foundation of another City of Refuge up there, and I want to take a look at it."

"Where's Bolan and the breed?"

"We buried 'em down on Fall Creek." And swinging to his saddle, Welsh took the trail to the crossing of the Blue.

"Well I'll be damned!" muttered Gray. "You never kin tell what's going to happen in this country. Joe Tybee's nevvy has got him a prisoner, and she looks like she liked it."

A Very Unusual Story of Darkest Africa



On *the* Ivories

By T. SAMSON MILLER

THE white moon of West Africa silvered the tops of the drooping mangroves. Over against the stockade of the trading compound a dozen or so blacks gyrated to the changing rhythms of a tomtom. A crocodile splashed in the river, and something aroused a colony of monkeys to excited chattering. For ten minutes, perhaps, then, the jungle sank back into its heavy silence. Behind a mosquito curtain over the entrance to the trader's low clay house sat a white man with a coppery beard, from which jutted a black Kanembu pipe, whose rank smoke mixed with that from the cigar of a younger man in spotless ducks. The bearded man's voice rumbled steadily, with an easy earnestness that at times had a slightly contemptuous and half jocular note.

What, mister! You don't know what "on the ivories" means! Lordy, you make me realize how new to the Coast you government Percivals are. Not meaning anything personal by that "Percival," which is a sort of name that got going around among the traders when the spic-and-spans began coming to Nigeria. A spic-and-span, mister? Why, like as not it'll sport a monocle, and maybe a captain's shoulder straps. Or maybe it's in pongee and Cawnpore helmet, and a red cummerbund, to show it is government.

As I was saying, Old McQuirk was on the ivories—following the ivory trade, that is—nigh gone fifty years. And now he's dropped out of the reckoning and you find me—Bill Roche, of whom you've heard a thing or two, no doubt—cuckooing in his station. Being the district commissioner, just out and raw to the country, you're full of suspicion. Yeh, you've heard of Bill Roche. There was that trouble up in Sokoto; but when the resident of El Jed claimed I was slaving he wasn't allowing for shades of difference in the term. That string of niggers was wished on me by the foxy Sariki of M'gombi, who then tipped off the resident. I had to have carriers, didn't I? I couldn't be too particular whether they were freemen.

Slavery! Time was blacks sold themselves into voluntary slavery to McQuirk for just a pinch of salt. Mister, they'd shut their fists on a small spill of salt in their palms and hurry into hiding before they got into a fight with other niggers over it. Salt ... I could tell you a lot about salt, mister. It's made history from the Ivory Coast to Timbuktu; it's made caravan routes and it's made wars. . . .

But you want to know about Skipper. What's that?. . .Why do I call McQuirk, "Skipper." He skippered a bark to the Oil Rivers, bartering beads and trinkets over the bulwarks for ivory, rubber, palm oil nuts, monkey fur. Yeh, monkey fur had a market those days. Those days! A string of glass beads worth sixpence'd change hands for a sixty pound tusk. A trader didn't trouble himself about mahogany and ebony and trifles, then. Yeh, McQuirk captained a bark.

See that figurehead at the foot of the compound—mermaid with flowing gold hair and scaly tail. That's all there was left after the Oru burned the bark. Skipper was sleeping in his cabin, when a canoeload of innocent looking Oru came alongside and showed a harmless inquisitiveness in the workings of the ship. The crew fell for the trick; let 'em aboard. Another canoeload paddled alongside and skinned up to deck. Of a sudden a score or more of canoes swept out of the dark mangroves on both sides ... You've guessed it, mister.

McQuirk put up such a fight the Oru'd rather have him for a live enemy than a dead one. A dead enemy is a heap more dangerous than a live one, to the Oru way of thinking. Spirit stuff, mister. McQuirk put up such a fight that he surely must have been protected by the gods. No nigger is going to kill a man protected by the gods.

Gods! Skipper put over something on the Oru when he set up that mermaid. She's his titular goddess. That figurehead gave him a heap o' prestige around here. But that was before the missionary and the government . . . Tell me, mister, why do most all the missionaries come from Kansas and have nasal voices? Why is the U. S. A. so het up over the morals of the Africans? Seems to me . . . Well, never mind.

HELP yourself to the bottle at your elbow, mister, when you feel like it. This isn't going to be a short spiel. You want to know how I come to be cuckooing in McQuirk's station. I can 'most hear your thoughts saying right out, "There's something wrong here? McQuirk has dropped out of sight. How comes this scallywag Bill Roche to be doing McQuirk's barter, drinking McQuirk's liquor, bossing McQuirk's blacks? Something wrong here."

In some ways you're right, mister. Life itself is all wrong, at times. But you haven't got to that point where a man looks back and asks himself what it's all about, whether it's worth while. Not you, mister. You're a *goberna* man, as the blacks say—a Percival. You'll draw a salary for so many years, then a pension for so many years more. There's no chance of anything upsetting your calculations. With Skipper and me it worked out different.

Yeh, McQuirk's had to bend his stiff neck at last. And me? Why, you see me bartering cottons and pocket knives for rubber, palm oil nut and ebony, as tame as if I'd never bossed a half mile string of bobbing headloads o' ivory . . . The swing of the hippo thong of the headmen on laggards' backs, and "*Tiffia, tiffia! Agamma, agamma! Achika, achika!*" That means, "Go on, go on! Close up, close up! Altogether, altogether!" And there's mutterings: "O, white man, you take us into bad country; you take us far from our huts, our wives, our children." But that's nothing, when you have a hundred tusks—two hundred, maybe. A fortune! But that's all past. Game's played out.

Why, mister, I came down to digging in the burial grounds of the elephants. What's that? . . . Burial grounds of the elephants is nigger stuff, fable, you say. Tell you something. Look deep enough into a nigger fable and you'll find enough truth at the bottom to be useful. Elephants use the same drinking places, year after year. Well, every so often a rogue elephant, an old bull past breeding and driven off by the herd, teeters to the drinking hole, his wrinkled skin hanging loose all over his body and only a pair of big tusks left of the glory that once had been his.

Yeh, you can dig up big tusks around the watering places. But you do it only when all else has failed, for the ivory is green and yellow; hardly worth the government royalty of two shillings the pound and all the suspicions as to where you got it. Yeh, the government clapped a tax on ivory. Somebody's got to pay the salaries of the Percivals.

Your eyes popped, mister, when I said of the rogue elephant "the glory that once had been his." I got your thought, mister. You get in the way of reading thoughts and faces in palaver, when it's on a hair balance whether you are going to make it right or be stuck full of assagais. You had a thought that "the glory that once had been his" wasn't the lingo of a palm oil ruffian, or a "bally nigger driver," as a monocled Percival once chirped at me. Why, mister, when I stepped aboard a Liverpool boat for the Coast some forty years ago I talked as proper as the best.

What's that you say, mister? . . . No, I'm not spieling my way to your sympathies. I'm telling this the only way I know how. When you've legged it in the silences, or rotted with malaria in a hut-of-the-strangers, or sat in an emir's courtyard, day on day, whilst his spies are hunting round to find out if you are the simple trader you claim to be, or a spy come to steal his country, or to juju his country, or if you have riches somewhere and are worth putting to the torture—why, mister, you get into the way of thinking in big sweeps.

And this trouble of McQuirk's was tangled up in strange doings, which you D. C.'s try to fool yourselves don't happen any more. I could put the whole thing on the shoulders of the Egbo Society and a black from America. But you've got to get the whole sweep of the thing, or you won't be allowing there's times a man's got to act a shade outside the law; you'll be laying a murder charge against me and my big nigger, Tiny, over a bit of skull cracking, for one thing.

THE skull cracking came at the start—right when Tiny and me were least looking for trouble. You'll go a long way to avoid trouble when you're flat, mister. Flat! I had even traded off my gun; traded it to a Fantee chief for a canoe. But hear me out, before you hang on me a charge of trading firearms to natives. Flat! It had been plantains, and now and then a three finger dip into a nigger's mealie pot, for me and Tiny since we struck the delta. When the trouble hit us I was peeling a plantain and talking at Tiny's bending back; talking to put heart into his paddling, and maybe to fool myself.

The jungle is depressing, mister, after you're used to the trails of open country. No, I wasn't feeling cocky enough for trouble. I was thinking of the laugh old McQuirk would have on me. "Limber Legs," he called me, and preached the advantages of a trading station over what he called "traipsing after will-o'-the-wisps;" wanted me to go in with him, that time I spelled him here whilst he took a sea trip up the coast to get the fever out of his blood.

But a feller in London had written me he had a customer, a professor, who'd give a hundred pounds for the skull of a female gorilla. Maybe he would give a hundred and fifty. But it had to be the skull of a female. There were plenty of male skulls, for the female scurries off into the bush, whilst the male covers her trail, and pays the price. Anyway, I'd always wanted to see the Cameroon country. They said that down there . . . But that's the way of it, mister. You're always hankering to try new country.

I didn't get the skull, either. Oh, I had a chance—a sure thing. But she looked back and curved an arm about a baby at her breasts and . . . I couldn't shoot . . . Well, I was cheering Tiny with a spiel that we would soon be tucking ourselves around palm oil chop—I could see meat and yams and *okroi*, chili seasoned, swimming in palm oil. And how tickled McQuirk'd be to see us, and not letting on that I was funking the hee-haw he would give me, nor a scare that he might have sold out and gone home.

You've got to swagger it high before your nigger, mister. I'd say to take a stream to the right, or swing up a channel to the left, and we'd sure be hitting the station that sundown. It wouldn't have done to let Tiny know I was making stabs at the direction. I was glad he had his back to me when we sighted a canoeful of Oru, or he might have seen the relief in my face. Yes, we had struck Oru country, and that meant we were right for the station. You can't mistake the Oru tribal mark—a gash down each cheek and a circle cicatriced on the forehead.

I gave them the friendship sign: hands held out, palms turned up—open palms. But they drove their canoe at us, yelling. I bawled out I was a friend of McQuirk's. That ought to have done the trick, for Skipper had blood oath brotherhood with the Oru.

You should hear Skipper tell what happened after the burning of the bark, mister. It's his epic. Hear him tell how he and the chief punctured a vein in their arms and put a pinch of salt on the small clot of blood that appeared, then licked it off. You should hear Skipper tell it. He makes those little clots of blood look bigger than all the rifles of the Percivals and the gospeling of the handshaking troublemakers—the missionaries, mister. He'd get fierce about it, would ask what right we have to force religion and law on those who have religion and law of their own, and that when it comes to civilizing savages, leave it to the trader and squaredealing. He'd get fierce about it. . . .

I bawled to the Oru I was a friend of McQuirk's. I was answered by a guffaw; a single guffaw, that never came from the throat of a jungleman; the guffaw of a spoiled nigger . . . A spoiled nigger, mister? Why, a black who has been mission schooled, or been servant to a fool white who let down the barriers. The upcountry's getting to be so full of them that you couldn't take a picture of native life that hasn't a pair of trousers in it. Time was . . . All right, mister. Jack me up when I wander. The guffawer stood up, and when I saw him I knew heap big trouble had come to the Oru country. He had yellow ochre rings around his breasts, two more on his belly, and a white ring of *alumbi* chalk in the middle. A degree sign of the Egbo Society.

I've been initiated into a few nigger societies, mister. It helps you get around. But no white ever had a chance to join the Egbo. He wouldn't want to. Time was the *zoom! zoom!* of the Egbo summoning drum terrorized the whole country. From the Gold Coast nigh to Congo, the chiefs bowed to it. Made you think of what history says about the kings of Europe cringing to a papal bull. 'Twas the big trading companies that put the crimp on the Egbo. At heart, the blacks want to barter and be peaceful. So a trading company took its territory, or its "sphere of influence," as the Royal Niger Company styled it, under its protection. So when the Egbo drum . . . What's that, mister? . . . How did the blacks know it was the Egbo drum? Lordy, drums talk, for one thing, and for another, drums are different.

This yellow ring that gave me the guffaw was a Nkanda, which is a middle degree of the Egbo. His presence among the Oru gave me a bad jolt. But I had no time to wonder. The Oru dived into the river and came at us. Mister, they seemed to run on all fours on top of the water. These junglemen are almost amphibious. They're built powerful above the waist and have a long reach; for they practically travel on their arms, swimming or paddling or swinging apelike through the jungle on the sucker roots. Long arms and great chests. The other tribes nicknamed the Oru the "Long Arms." Speediest creatures in the water I ever saw. And powerful . . . 'Twas lucky we had no keel. Know that trick, mister? They'll clutch the keel all along and turn a canoe over. They came at us. I stripped the bunch of plantains to the stalk. That gave me a good club. Tiny had a mahogany paddle. As fast as fingers clawed the gun'ls we smashed 'em, and cracked a few skulls.

The Nkanda wasn't doing any guffawing, as I could hear, when we made our getaway.

But what got into the Oru to make them act that way? Might have been my red beard. Red is tabu with savages. Sometimes my beard would get 'em humping to me like fighting cats and sometimes it acted the other way. Once among the Bantu people it made me a god, for a spell. What the savage is scared of he fawns to, worships. His gods are feared gods, like the punishing God I was raised to believe in. Sometimes it seems to me, mister, all religion got its start in fear, and if you knew nigger stuff you'd think the same. But was it my beard? That Egbo man there, and the Oru paying no attention to my shout that I was a friend of their blood oath brother, McQuirk, didn't look right. It sure worried my hopes of palm oil chop and a rest-up at a peaceful trading station.

NIGHT dropped down; and Tiny had been paddling since sunup. By rights I should have called it a day. But I was worried to get sight of Skipper. So we took to hauling along on the mangroves branches that swept the river. Of a sudden Tiny pricked up his ears and bayed, "Marsa, a tchuka-tchuku done come." Sure enough, a small launch spluttered around a bend—*tchuka-tchuku! tchuka-tchuku!* In the lighted cockpit was a spic-and-span feller, not much more'n a boy, with a baby mustache that somehow didn't seem in keeping with a machine gun rigged at his right elbow. He passed without sighting us.

He wasn't troubling himself to sight anything. He was singing a music hall ditty. Honest, mister, singing! A Percival, for sure. A launch, a machine gun, a case of canned French dinners and a case of Scotch, and the prestige of being a *goberna* man! Yeh, he could afford to sing. But what was he doing in these parts, in Skipper's sphere of influence? And how would Skipper take it? Take it pretty hard. Take it fierce, mister. . . .

Oh, you aren't interested in McQuirk's odd notions about government, you say! Shucks, you've got to get Skipper's feelings about Percivals, or you'll be thinking I was sheer crazy to do what I did in Oru Town. But your interruptions jumble me. Oru Town doesn't come till the end.

The night was well along when we raised the station. We beached beside a long dugout with "J. M." burned in the prow—"J. M." for Jock McQuirk. By that sign Skipper was there. Hardly, however, had my hopes of palm oil chop taken cheer ere they sank on signs of mischief. The mermaid had been toppled face down in the mud. There was a lot of meaning in that. Parties had dethroned and heaped insult on Skipper's protecting goddess. It was the same as if they had defied Skipper's authority, and advertised to the Oru that he was small cheese, after all. Too, the house was dark, the compound deserted.

But that last was soon amended. Blacks skulked out of those huts against the stockade. The starlight glinted up little brass rods on strings round their necks. The Brass River boys who worked the station. In the Brass district the barter medium is little brass rods. A Brass boy totes his bank account along with him wherever he goes.

I asked where the marsa was. They said their marsa no lib—not live—not there, not around. Well, where was he? Faces became blank masks, eyes skulked, glanced fearfully around. An Egbo spy might be listening. The Egbo have long ears. The proverb is, "When the Egbo come, a whisper is a loud voice." Oh, for sure, Egbo stuff. No getting a thing out of the Brass boys. They're "Egbo scared," as we used to say.

I went up to the house with a sick feeling. Tiny plugged at my heels, as always; at my heels, shielding my back, ready for anything. Man Friday stuff. Mister, there's times the devotion of my nigger gives me a sort of awe.

A thin streak of light showed under a blanket hung over the entrance. Whoever was in there was scared of showing up in a light. By which sign, danger threatened from outside. I heard a voice—a black's. He was whining argumentatively that he had worked up the scheme, the whole idea had been his, and that he brought to it backing from America, without which it wouldn't stand. Another black's voice cooed menacingly. "Don' you' worry yo' head, mistah, 'bout dat. Leave it to Marmaduke Jones." At that the whiner snarled out that Marmaduke Jones was biting off more than he could chew, and if Jones murdered McQuirk, the British would wipe them out, and they'd all be ground under the heels of the greedy capitalists. His very words, mister. The other derisively told him to go and make his talk to the Iron Claws.

Iron Claws! Lordy, had that old deviltry come boldly to the front again! . . . The Iron Claws, mister? Why, it's nigger frightfulness. But you'll understand when you've heard me tell that night at the station. And for God's sake get rid of that look on your face. I'm giving it to you straight. . . .

I nudged Tiny and we busted in. When you're dealing with bad niggers, surprise them—jump 'em bold.

TWO spoiled niggers were sitting over a squareface—a flat, black, square bottle of trade gin. You flicked an eyelid there, mister. No, McQuirk never sold liquor to natives. He was against it long before the law. All the same, it's good sometimes to have a squareface along with you. Good as a letter of introduction. A chief will mellow up and order food, and the palaver will be O. K. A squareface'll open up a whole country. It mayn't be palatable to the wise ones at home, but squarefaces paved the way for the troublemaker and his Bible. . . .

A couple of spoiled niggers sitting over a squareface. Make a poem of it, mister. "Two men sitting on a dead man's chest; yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!" One of the blacks was a Nkanda, yellow ringed and naked above a pair of riding breeches, putties and tan shoes. He had no tribal mark. From the Gold Coast, for sure. Up there the blacks are educated away from tribal marks and the traditions. They go to school and expect government clerkships, and there not being enough government jobs to go around, they become agitators, mischief makers. The other misfit had a pudgy face, whose puffy cheeks bore the Oru gash, and over his murky eyes was the cicatriced circle. An Oru gone soft.

But how in everything did an Oru come by a straw hat, pongee suit, tennis shirt and a red sash? If it had been a tan derby, many colored shirt, blazer jacket, striped trousers and patent leather shoes, why, he'd have been the usual G string promoted to the trousered brigade. Mister, he was altogether too correct, too darned sophisticated. He wore on his coat collar a small American flag. The Stars and Stripes on an Oru?

And somehow his face seemed familiar ... A thought crossed your eyes there, mister. To you, now, one nigger's face is like another's. Yeh, when you're green, a whole tribe will look as alike as a bunch of black faced sheep. You'll learn different. You'll learn blacks have character marks; you'll learn there's good and bad among them, misers and open-hearted, gay and sad, trustworthy and treacherous; the same as with us. Sometimes I get to thinking that human nature hasn't traveled so very far ... Help yourself to the Scotch. That'll keep you in patience.

The two misfits gaped at me, then at Tiny, then their frozen stares went to the blanket, as if others might be heading in behind us. Yeh, the Gold Coast buck was thinking perhaps yellow rings didn't count for so much, after all. But the scare of the Oru was mingled with a look of crafty relief. It was a guess that he was the one who had whined that he was necessary to the success of the scheme, whatever that was. Yeh, the Egbo had perhaps decided to get along without him, hence his fright. Anyway, that scare made him my meat. I barked at him to stand up and remove his hat, in the presence of a marsa, and spill out who he was and what he was doing there.

"Sah," he mouthed, "Ah'm Mistah Upton Sinclair-Debs Esquiah." A black drops his native name for those of the marsas he serves. But that was not the case this time. Mistah Esquiah said that Sinclair and Debs were two great men in America, and leaders of the cause. "All peoples," he parroted, "are born of an equableness for the right to the pursuing of happiness."

At that point, the Gold Coast buck took an eyeful of my rags and let out a bellow that I wasn't a *goberna* man. Mister, it has got so that the same black who stands respectfully before a Percival will be swaggeringly impudent to a trader. It gets me boiling. Why, time was . . . Never mind. Yellow Rings takes heart on my rags and demands my business there. I wanted to know what the hell he was doing there. He said he was put in charge by Marmaduke Jones. And who is this Marmaduke Jones? Both misfits shout it together. But I might have guessed it. Marmaduke is the supreme high factotum extraordinary of the lodge of murdering Egbo.

I laid that information aside for the moment, asking why they had been expecting a government man. Mistah Esquiah explained. The Brass boys had drummed forth the alarm, that McQuirk was in juju palaver at Oru Town. It came out, shiftily, that Skipper had gone to Oru Town to palaver a barter boycott of his station. I pointed out that Skipper's dugout was on the beach. Mistah Esquiah replied idiotically that it had come down without McQuirk. Yes, the Brass boys paddling for dear life. Oh sure.

I made a stab at it and charged that Skipper found Mistah Esquiah the mischiefmaker in Oru Town. He mumbled stubbornly, "Mistah McQuirk buttered his own bun and he must lie on it." The pupils of his eyes slid into the inner corners and contracted their focus to his flat nose. That jolted a memory of McQuirk charging a punkah boy with theft; a ten year old memory it was. For sure, Mistah Esquiah was McQuirk's one time punkah boy. Orogundi, his name was. He was much too smart, so Skipper had given him to an American missionary. Skipper had to have his little jokes on the troublemakers.

I WAS taking a notion to crack the heads of the misfits together and knock the truth out, when the Egbo took a hand. The danger that had threatened beyond the blanket materialized. Frightened cries rose from the huts of the Brass boys: "Oh, Oh, Oh! The Makawbaw done come. The Iron Claws are here. Oh, oh, oh! The Five Killers!"

No, mister I didn't run out to see. No need to. The Five Killers were old stuff. Out there were five blacks in leopard skins, with iron claws fixed to their fingers, crawling all fours and growling. They believed they were transformed into leopards. Self-hypnotism, mister. I've seen 'em. They go into a trance, mumbling charms that turn them into leopards. They will stalk their victim for days, weeks, months—always acting like leopards. In the end they get their man, or he gets sick of it and suicides, or he goes crazy.

The Nkanda—the Gold Coast buck—gave Orogundi a horrible grin. A simple Oru, even with American trimmings, should think twice before he monkeys with Egbo.

No, I didn't give the Iron Claws a thought. They'd make their demonstration—nigger frightfulness—and draw off to the jungle. They probably made the visit nightly, as much for Orogundi as to put a scare of their new masters into the Brass boys. All that concerned me just then was the singing Percival heading for Oru Town to rescue Skipper. Rescued by a Percival! A Percival with all the trappings—launch, machine gun, government prestige.

I gave Tiny the sign to jump the Gold Coast buck. We trussed him and tied him to the table. I remembered there used to be revolvers and ammunition in a pocket in the clay wall. I found them, gave Tiny a gun, slipped one in my hip pocket. I jolted Mistah Esquiah out of his paralysis, told him he was coming along to Oru Town and we were going to have a talk about everything on the way. We took Skipper's dugout, with twenty Brass boys at the paddles, Tiny at the stern paddle. We would make Oru Town along towards mid-morning. That gave me lots of time to work on Orogundi.

First I went at the juju palaver. I had to know what I was going up against. But I was balked by stubborn repetitions of, "Mistah McQuirk buttered his own bun and he must lie on it." Then when I swung to the pirating of Skipper's station and barter by the Egbo, when I tried to get information on the "scheme," he sulked behind, "All peoples are born of an equableness for the right to the pursuing of happiness." But a streak of boastfulness in him opened out on his American adventures and pretty soon I had a lot of information.

Orogundi had been five years in America, where the missionary had taken him, as Exhibit A in the cause of heathen conversion. It was the troublemaker's idea to send Orogundi back to his people an ordained minister. But somewhere or other the Oru had broken away from religion and become what he called a "Red." He returned to his people as a patriot. He was to be their Great Emancipator. A patriot with a profit sharing scheme, it turned out. The Oru-American Company, registered in Louisiana, with negro stockholders, was the profit side of the scheme. The glory part of it was the Independent Oru Republic, backed by radical sentiment in America. Which is not as foolish as it might look.

The Oru country is a British Protectorate, not a British dependency. The American stockholders might protest "Ruthless British Exploitation," or denounce "The country grabbing greedy British capitalists." Yeh, Mister Esquiah had his text learned pat. He parroted readymade phrases as glibly as the best patriots. Lordy knows what might not have been, if poor Orogundi had not stopped off at the Gold Coast and got acquainted with Marmaduke Jones, high factotum of the Egbo. From that moment the grand scheme passed from Orogundi into abler hands.

You get it, mister? Skipper's barter hold and his blood oath brotherhood with the Oru were in the way. But it is one thing to eliminate a native by the way of the Iron Claws, quite another to get rid of a white. The last demands subtlety. And there's where the juju palaver comes in.

I knew, "by inference and deduction," as the El Jed resident smirked to me over the slaves, that Skipper had gone to Oru Town to palaver the barter boycott, that he had gone in the dugout, which had returned without him. He had run into the patriot, and . . . But there I questioned Mistah Esquiah. Never mind what measures I took to get answers, and right answers, too.

MISTER, Skipper thought I took fool risks. Safe, steady barter for him. Safe barter! The joke was certainly on Skipper. He arrives at Oru Town, to have a friendly talk with his friends. What haven't they been sending down any barter lately? Oh, sure. He isn't expecting trouble. But the Oru patriot Mistah Esquiah is among the Oru who gather on the bank, not so friendly as ought to be the case. The Egbo keep in the background. Let the fool Orogundi pull their chestnuts from the fire.

Skipper spots in the pongee suit and straw hat the nigger in the woodpile, recognizes his former punkah boy, who went with the missionary to America and there shed his awe of whites as a superior race, on sights of drunks and mobs and slatterns. Skipper makes for the spoiled nigger, to boot him down the bank. The misfit takes fright, whips off his red sash and waves it. "The Red Flag of equableness," as he told it me.

Yeh, he waved red before the Oru. Broke the great tabu of spiritism. Red infuriates the spirits of those who were cut off from life by accident. That's easy understood, from the blacks' view of it. Red is the color of blood. It's like taunting the spirits, then, for blood is the life. The response is not what the patriot expects. Fear, mister. Fear of witchcraft and of evil spirits drives junglemen crazy. Orogundi makes for the dugout. The Brass boys—ugh! They never were fighters, even before the Brass country was missionized. They paddled off. Skipper was stranded. But that ought not to have been any great difficulty. My guess was that right there Egbo had come out bold and taken a hand.

But see here, mister, you ought to know all about Egbo. The singing Percival must have turned in a report . . . Eh? Oh, yes, you're just out from home. And I mind now that the Percival was down from headquarters for the special business of getting the Egbo trail. He happened to be in the district when the drums talked of the white trader being in juju palaver. Yeh, I learned that on the roof of the palaver house in Oru Town. What's that, mister? . . . How did I get there? I landed from the dugout, around a bend in the stream before Oru Town; landed beside a launch snugged into the mangroves.

The singing Percival had landed there and approached Oru Town cautiously through the jungle. That looked a good example to imitate. I left Tiny in charge of the dugout. I ordered him to steal along under cover of the mangroves till he had Oru Town within distance of a dash; wait there, and if he heard my gun, to come on as fast as the paddles could make it. If the Brass boys showed a disposition to balk—why, leave it to Tiny. He had a gun, and the stern seat gave him command of the paddlers sitting on the gunwales.

I landed in a tangle of mangrove roots, squirmed through undergrowth to the gloom, threaded among tree trunks for about twenty minutes, saw daylight ahead, and heard hens cackle, goats bleat—thin, plaintive bleats—the rhythmic pounding of pestle in mealie mortars, and woman's chatter . . . No, mister, I'm not spinning it out, as you say. Oh, sure. The tiny sounds of the domestic life of an African village, tiny sounds in a great surrounding silence, get to have real meaning, mister. They'll come to you when you're gone home, thinking you're through and done with skeeters, fever, still heat, smelling blacks, buzzards, molten suns, tomtoms. They'll come a-calling. Or when you've trekked . . . All right, mister. Jack me up when I wander.

Women pounding mealies, children toddling around, but not a grown male in sight! That cheered me. There was big palaver on somewhere. Skipper's fate was not decided. Juju palaver takes its time. Sure. It took the bishops months to convict Joan of Arc of sorcery. Things have to be done proper.

A buzz of voices came from a barny house planted against the jungle behind the village. That would be the palaver house. There was a leopard's skull over the entrance. Egbo was in session. The leopard is the totem of Egbo. Yeh, sacred animals and totems. The same the world over.

I worked round under cover of the jungle to the house, wondering what had happened to the Percival. I had to know what was going on in there. But I could not go round to the entrance and peep, for that would have exposed me to the women in the village. I could distinguish nothing of what was being said within because of high clay walls, which were without slits. The thatch, I noted, sloped away from what was evidently a flat top. If I got up there I could, unseen from the village, bore a peephole through the thatch. A baobab tree, probably sacred, rose close against the house, its branches sweeping the thatch. It was as good as a screened ladder.

IT TURNED out that my idea was not original. Lordy, the Percival was up there, lying flat with his coat pulled up over his head to darken a peephole. He did not know I was there till I was prone alongside him. He ought to have been knocked flat by surprise, but he wasn't. . . . Sure, nobody's saying the Percivals aren't a cool lot. He poked his head out of the coat and said, "Hullo, Red Beard. Who are you? What are you doing here?" As cool as that. I said I was a friend of McQuirk's. He chuckled to me to take a peep at my friend, for I mayn't see the like again in a lifetime.

I didn't like that chuckle. It was too perky, too confident. I liked it still less when I looked down in that pesthouse of juju doings.

A murk of smoke from grass torches obscured and distorted the figures down there between pillars that supported the roof. I had a sensation as of time having been turned back to the dark ages when the people crowded the cathedrals to witness heresy and sorcery trials. Oh sure. A cathedral—incense smoke, high altar, candles, vested priests, flickering lights, images, rituals, dark mysteries! The same the world over. The peephole was right beside the central pillar—the judgment pillar. Right beneath me was Skipper, sitting with his back to the pillar, stiffening his spine against it and striving to maintain a scoffing appearance in the face of the deviltry and body weariness and unventilated air that was foul with the stench of packed, perspiring bodies.

Behind him the top-heavy, ugly Oru made a solid mass, to the exit, which for a door had a reed curtain. Before him squatted wizards in masks and high head-dresses and abominations. They sat at the foot of a tiered dais. Oh, Egbo does things proper! The bottom tier is occupied by Oru initiates. Next above them are the Oku-Akama, or the Priests' Consent. Next come the yellow ringed Nkanda. At the top, supreme and glorified, is Marmaduke Jones, in a top hat and yellow robe. At his feet is the ritual or summons drum of the society. A black at his right holds a whip, another on his left has a hoop covered with yellow cloth. The whip proclaims the right of the society to flog, the hoop— Well, you can imagine Marmaduke's spasms of good feeling when victims are made to crawl humbly through the hoop. That's nigger psychology; crow it over the under dog.

Marmaduke Jones! Emperor Jones! Archbishop and High Factotum Jones! Sixty-second-degree-and-lus Jones! A Gold Coast buck rampant with power! Power, loot, women, gin! I present the picture to the radical sentiment of the stay-at-homes.

Power? Poor Mistah Esquiah is in the way. He knows too much. Is making big mouth that the scheme was his. He wants his division of the spoils. He is in the way. McQuirk, blood oath brother to the Oru, is in the way. But a wise buck like Marmaduke is not going to saddle himself with the murder of a white; not if he can sift the guilt onto the wizards. Let them find McQuirk guilty of breaking the great tabu; let them so construe Orogundi's waving of red. Someone's got to expiate that offense. See it from the viewpoint of the superstitious terrors of the blacks and it is simple enough. So Marmaduke leaves it to the wizards to provide him with an alibi. But the wizards are between the Egbo, on the one side, and the Oru and their king on the other. And there's where the Percival's chuckle comes in. McQuirk is in no immediate danger.

The buzz of voices has dropped away to a single, impassioned drone. The king of the Oru is making a spiel for his white brother. The temporal power is enlisted against the spiritual power. Ay, a man does not forget his school history. So the Percival can chuckle and bide his time; listen in on the deviltry and cinch his case against slippery Marmaduke. Yeh, that's his job. And what matters the humiliations of a trader feller, a palm oil ruffian, a nigger driver!

It made me boil. So when the Percival says he has learned enough to get Marmaduke a stretch of jail, and condescends to invite me to aid in the arrest, and rescue McQuirk on the side—on the side, damn him!—I turn a few flip-flaps in my head.

TELL me I did a fool thing. Tell me I took fool risks. I know it. But it would never have done to let that chirpy Percival rescue Skipper. A Percival with a baby mustache, a tchuka-tchuku, a machine gun and the prestige of a *goberna* man, rescuing Skipper from his blood oath brothers! Skipper! With his pride in a paternal overlordship over the Oru, his prideful faith in trade and squaredealing. It would break his spirit.

I told the Percival I would stay at the peephole and keep an eye on the devils down below, whilst he went for the launch. As he went down the baobab and off into the jungle I pared down the thatch around the central pillar. Then, the Percival being in the sound smothering jungle, I pulled the gun from my hip and fired in the air. Almost instantly the dugout, with Tiny standing in the stern holding his gun on the Brass boys, dashed from the cover of the mangroves for the beach. I crashed through the roof and dropped down the pillar, firing twice as I dropped.

Jump bad niggers bold. Surprise 'em. Then act swiftly. The two cracking reports of my gun in the hall was a bit of frightfulness. The guns of the slavers of old days left a terror in niggers which has been passed onto their born-afters. And here was a white man, dropped out of nowhere. All eyes go to the gaping hole in the roof, expecting other whites to drop down. I covered Marmaduke. But it wasn't necessary. He let out a roar: "De *goberna* man!" I let him think it.

There was nothing to it. We walked through a lane the Oru made for us, Skipper leading, then Marmaduke with the cold nose of my gun pressed against the small of his back. Yeh, we *walked* out, made the dugout before the Egbo rascals woke up to what was doing . . . The Brass boys needed no urging.

Skipper slumped down in the well of the canoe. Thirty hours he had been in that place, breathing foul air, fretted by his helplessness, raging inwardly at the Gold Coast bucks, crazy to get his hands on the throat of Marmaduke Jones. We were around the bend before he spoke. Well, Skipper was not the one to grab the hand of a deliverer and call down on him the blessing of heaven.

"Man," he croaked, " 'twas verra dramatic, popping through the roof and popping y'r gun and a'. Verra dramatic. But y' sp'iled an interesting seetuation. I was like tae see my Oru friendship win ower those Egbo rogues. The Oru had acted thoughtlessly. Man——"

He was going on to derisively belittle his danger, when the tchuka-tchuku hove in sight. He stiffened his back, and stiffened his face. But I got in ahead of his bark.

"Well, if this isn't luck," I said. "Here's a Percival shown up, real handy. We'll unload on him the High Factotum of Egbo and the Oru patriot, Mistah Esquiah."

The dumbfoundment of the Percival as he drew alongside favored a speedy transhipment without explanations that would have hurt Skipper's pride.

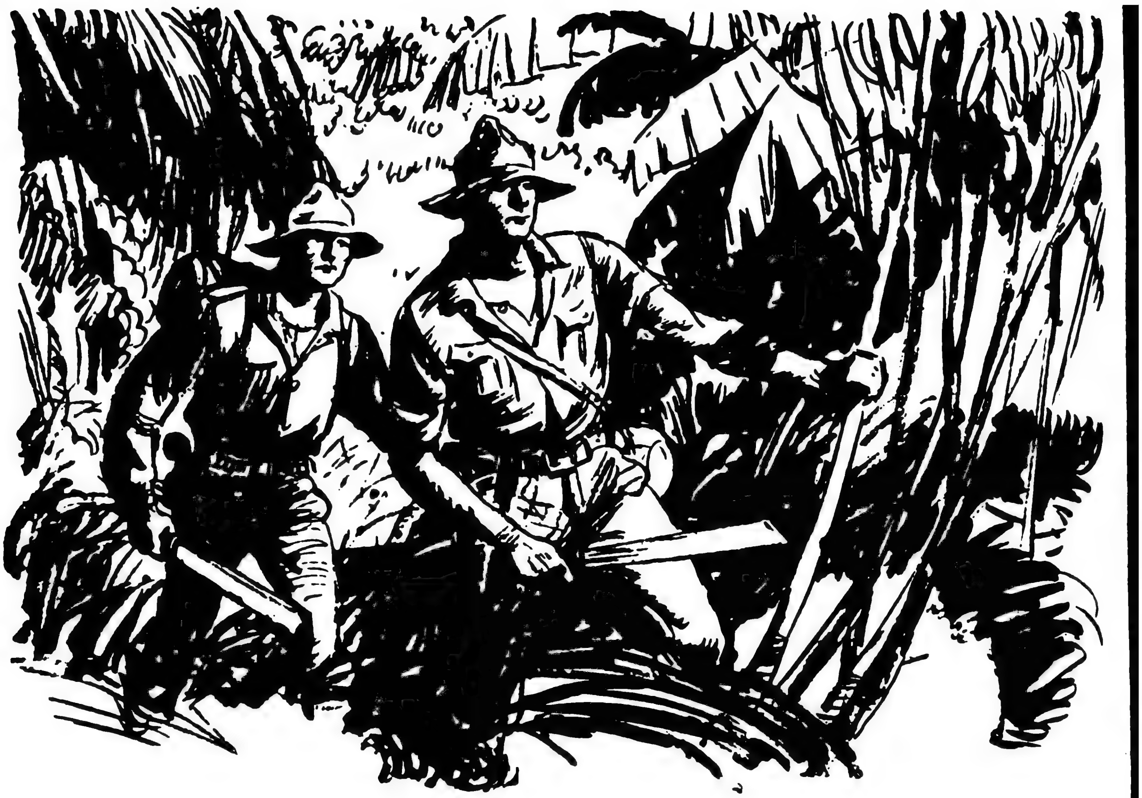
"What's that offeecial jackanapes doing in *my* country?" he growled, as the Brass boys, at a quick command from me, paddled on.

I said the Percival had maybe lost his way in the streams, and he was nothing for real men to bother their heads over. That satisfied Skipper.

"And y'rself, Limber Legs?" he queried, and gave my rags the once over, and began the old lecture about traipsing after fortune, and if I had a grain of sense I would root in at barter.

I said I was willing to take on at his station for a spell, if so's he wanted to make a trip home. I would not say for his health's sake. That would never have done. Yeh, I guess we both did a bit of bluffing. But I didn't get away with mine.

"Willing?" he growled. "Y' limber-legged chaser o' will-o'-wisps . . . I see you've got the same nigger. A nice pair y' are."



TWO seedy looking young Americans turned the corner and came down the sidewalk toward the piazza of the Bola de Orc Hotel where General Lee Christmas sat at a table with a cool drink in front of him. The khaki suits of the two men were old and frayed, their felt hats—not Stetsons by the way—were flopping of brim and pinched to a sharp crease at the top, and they wore in lieu of leggings a string tied around their pants above their rusty shoes.

General Christmas greeted them with a good-natured " 'Lo boys!" and motioned for them to come on over. They seated themselves at either side of the small marble topped table. The general had his back to the wall of the house, a custom that had grown on him due to attempted assassinations. He was dressed in white duck and his Panama was shoved back on his head. He was clean shaven, and his hair, where it showed under the edge of his hat, was as white as cotton. It was only the pale blue eyes with the peering pupils that showed anything out of the ordinary.

Señor Cuervo, proprietor of the hotel, and doing his own bar tending, came shuffling out. He picked up the empty glass in front of Christmas and stood smirking from one to the other of the three, awaiting the order. Rumor had it that he was one of the Guatemalan president's most trusted spies; a thing of little importance, for every other man in the republic was a spy of some sort or other.

"What'll it be?" asked Christmas.

"Redeye," drawled Len Blanton, the taller and firmer faced of the two.

"Me the same," sighed Hughie Rose.

Rose was very light complected. His hair was a silky blond and his eyebrows were like wisps of down. His round eyes were China blue. His cheeks were pink and the curve of his lips was almost girlish. He, like the other, came from Texas. And not all men are hardboiled who come from this State. It produces weak sisters like all other States. Blanton looked the part. He was brazen of look and voice. He met the hard gaze of the general fearlessly when Lee peered for an instant into his close-set, small eyes. Hughie Rose managed to look down and away, in the manner of a friendly collie who does not care to meet a direct look.

The three men downed their drinks.

A Novelette of
Nicaragua

EMULATION

By

EDGAR YOUNG

Here is a story out of that shadowy region which lies between fiction and fact. It is grim, stark, powerful. In its pages two men come to life. They live in futile, cruel fashion, yet somehow they attain that dignity which mankind has bestowed upon the heroes of all time.

The liquor was fiery. Cuervo had watered the barrel but he had also added a ball of potash and a plug of tobacco to keep up the strength. Christmas drank it as if it were syrup. Blanton cleared his throat, and Hughie Rose frankly coughed and shook his head as the tears poured from his eyes.

"Whew!" he whistled.

Christmas grinned and Blanton gave Hughie a slight frown. Hughie was always showing weakness in some form or other. Almost of the same age, they had played together as boys, had gone to school together, and both had been attending a one horse military academy in San Antone when Blanton had talked up the soldier of fortune business in such fashion that he persuaded Hughie Rose to run away with him. Two years had passed and they had found the pickings of the game a bit slim. They arrived in Mexico just after Carranza was seated, and found things quiet at the time in the land of the snake and the cactus. They hoboed to the Guatemalan border and hiked the trail from there across to the Central Railroad, where a good-natured conductor hauled them to the capital. General Christmas had met them the next day and had induced them to join his "foreign legion," a dozen or more scalawags who hung about the city mooching a living and waiting for the next revolution to pop.

One had now popped and the awaiting warriors had slipped away singly and in twos and threes over the trail across Honduras and into Nicaragua where General Estrada was trying to oust the bloodthirsty tyrant, General Zelaya, from the presidency. Christmas had urged these two to wait. He had the matter up with the president of Guatemala, Señor Cabrera, who owed General Christmas some seventy thousand dollars gold, and who would undoubtedly, he thought, either pay this money or allow a few hundred barefoots to be sent surreptitiously through Honduras at night under charge of the two young Americans. Day after day they had been coming down to find out about it.

Lee passed over his cigaret case and the two took out pills and lit them. Blanton was frankly impatient. He pulled hard on his cigaret and blew on the fire as he exhaled. Rose looked sheepishly from one to the other. He knew what Blanton planned to say and he dreaded to hear him say it.

"What'd Cabrera say?" Blanton blurted suddenly.

Lee shrugged and made a face as if he were smelling something rotten.

"Hasn't said a word definite yet. All hopped up, I reckon, on morphine, and hasn't got around to it. It's got my goat waitin' for his answer, too."

"Why'n hell don't you start a revolution and chuck him out? You put him in, didn't you? Chuck the rascal out! These yellowbellies don't know what gratitude is. I'd shore be glad to help bust things wide open!"

CHRISTMAS cocked his ear back along the wall and into the open barroom door. He heard the proprietor's shuffling feet receding down the room after pausing for a while just within.

The general spoke confidentially.

"It's like this. I ought to do it. But right now I can't. I haven't worked my strings. Got no backin'. It takes a bit of figuring to work a revolution. I've let this bird dig in too hard. Give me six months and a chance to meet certain men, a chance to get in touch with American capitalists who are looking for concessions so that the Marines can be rung in as a last resort, and I can do it. Can't pull it right offhand. Also, he may come through yet."

"Aw, that bird! He's getting the grapes and won't do nothing. He's making a fool out of you!" growled Blanton.

"You may be right," agreed Christmas, "but right at the moment he's got the edge. Sit pretty for a time. I know both of you boys are broke but I'll scare up some dough. I haven't held up any of these spig merchants for a loan for some time. The big cigaret manufacturer is good for at least a hundred gold right now."

Blanton studied the general for a moment, puckering his round forehead and staring with his hard, small brown eyes. Hughie Rose had settled himself on the small of his back and was dreamily staring far away with unseeing eyes. Blanton's next words roused him and he turned to listen more closely.

"It's like this, Lee. Me and Rose here are tired of waitin'. We come down here with our necks bowed to get into a revolution and cop us out some jack."

Lee chuckled at Blanton's impatience.

"I know how you feel, Len! Felt that way more than once. Feel that way now, in fact. I know you're rarin' to go. You yourself are the type that makes good soldiers of fortune—impatient, impulsive, daredevil, chewing the bit and prancin'. You are a boy after my own heart and I know you'll stick." He saw Hughie redden and look down. He had not intended to hurt the lad's feelings by complimenting his partner and he now amended it.

"Both of you boys are O. K. Just do like Len does, Hughie, and you'll come out O. K. Remember you can't die but once, and you've got to die sometime anyhow. Might as well die one time as another. I've been shot at ten thousand times and only injured eight. And when it comes to knife and machete work, an American is equal to a score of spigs."

He went ahead with a reminiscence how he laid about with a saber when cornered in a swamp and mowed men down right and left.

Hughie Rose's face was a trifle pale as his vivid imagination conjured up the scene in all its horror. Len Blanton's eyes were shining. He, himself, would like to have been in Lee's shoes at that time.

Christmas told another one. It was about the time superior forces opposed his army in Honduras and he stripped his men at midnight and sent them on the enemy camp with orders to kill any man found with clothes on. This true occurence was most terrible in some of the details he gave. The screams and yells in the darkness as the machetes and gun butts slashed and thudded, the sights that met the eyes when the torches and campfires were lit, the grotesque mutilations that followed.

"Yeah, and I'm goin' to do some more of it. Just you boys stick around. I'll get this money out of Cabrera and get a force for you boys to lead. You'll make a name for yourselves in Nicaragua. If the revolution starts lagging I, myself, will come with the whole Guatemalan army. Get me?"

"We're not goin' to wait, Lee!" Blanton's voice was a bit sharp. "This waitin' is wearin' us out. We're goin' right now. That's what we come down to tell you. If you send men and money later, so much the better. Can you make a raise of twenty-five dollars gold to stake us over the trail."

General Christmas stood up.

"Shore can. Just keep setting here a few minutes. I've been layin' off levying on that cigaret maker for a month. If he don't come through with at least a hundred I'll close him up."

He hastened off the piazza and walked rapidly along the pavement and turned the corner.

"Reckon he'll get it?" asked Rose.

"Sure he'll get it. These native businesses are beholding to Lee. He's commander in chief of the army and they fear him like the plague while he's up. That's the thing, get up! Get some prestige and some cash and folks will listen to you."

"Yeah, if we live," qualified Rose.

"A-w-w-w-w-w! There you go again!"

He was in the act of saying more when General Christmas ran up the steps and hurried to his seat. He drew a wad of native bills from his coat pocket and laid them on the table in front of him. The *billete peso* was only worth a nickel of U. S. money so he counted and sorted for a few moments.

"*Dos mil* spig! Yep, it's here, all right. A hundred bucks gold. That cig man, Quevedo, is not above gypping a man."

He recounted again, split the money and handed half over to Blanton.

"There's fifty, and the two of you should hit Nicaragua with more than half of it. You've hit trail and so have I. Got many a good meal for a nickel gold and a man can sleep out anywhere."

The two lads were in good fettle. They arose, smiling almost from ear to ear. The general stood up and the two men thanked him profusely. Lee walked to the steps with them, shook hands, and watched them walk briskly up to the corner and turn to the left toward the Northern Railroad station.

THE FARE to Morales, where the trail across Honduras began, was a small item; but they were fortunate in finding that Bronky Smith, an old T.T.T. and soldier of fortune, game in one leg from a carbine ball in the knee, was conductor on the train that was about to leave. No American adventurer needed a ticket when Bronky collected the fares.

"Don't even look at that ticket window!" he called as they came through the waiting room. "Get right on! I'm due to leave in five minutes and if some money passengers don't show up I'll highball out ahead of time. Bet a dollar the two of ye are headed for Morales!"

"You shore guessed it, Bronky! How many's ahead of us on the road to Nicaragua?"

"The whole pack, thirteen of 'em. I've hauled them all. Haley Smith, who's on opposite runs with me, is gettin' a bit scary. Says we'll both get fired. Let 'em fire! I've a notion to hit the trail for Nicaragua, myself, anyway."

In the rear of the first class coach the two men seated themselves. A half dozen broadcloth and linen clad men occupied seats here and there along the car, and there were a couple of girls at the far end who kept turning and looking back. While it is said to be a fact that the Latin American man is minus a lot in looks and personality, this is not the case with the women and girls. They are lazy eyed, voluptuous, shapely, soft voiced, red lipped, and extremely well versed in the arts and wiles of fascination. Blanton excused himself and walked up the car as Bronky strolled down the aisle and sat down for a chat. Blanton tipped his hat to the two girls as he came up alongside them, passed a few words, turned over a seat and engaged in a conversation with them.

Bronky chuckled in admiration.

"That partner of yours has nerve! See him make them two. They're old Don Timoteo's daughters, high class society. They've been riding my train for a year and I don't dare say good morning. Blanton makes 'em as if they were peon huzzies. And he can't talk enough Spanish to keep warm! Can you beat it? He's a go-getter, that boy!"

He bubbled conversation as the train rolled down the slopes of the highlands into the milder, luxuriant lowlands. Pine and oak rapidly gave way to tree melon, banana bush and patches of pineapples. Hughie Rose answered Bronky in monosyllables and grunts plentiful enough to keep him going, but his eyes kept straying to the seats up ahead occupied by two handsome young Guatemaltecas with their backs to him, intently listening to what Len Blanton, his partner, was saying. He knew he spoke Spanish much better than

Len. Also, after a fashion, he had a way with him that attracted girls, and he knew it. But he didn't have the initiative to get up and go and talk with them as Len had done. The train was nearing Morales station when Bronky Smith got up and limped away through the car to the second class coach and Len looked up and saw Hughie sitting alone.

"Come on up!" he hailed.

Hughie strolled forward, lifted his hat and acknowledged the introduction with a bow and a smile. He barely had time to run his eyes over the two beauties when the air brakes shrieked and the train ground to a jerky stop. The girls had already learned two or three words of English from Blanton.

"Goo'-by, swithart!" giggled one while the men were shaking hands with them.

The men swung to the platform as the train pulled out. The girls came to the window and waved their tiny handkerchiefs until it rounded the bend.

"See me make them two?" asked Blanton, turning to Hughie with a friendly grin. "They're high class janes. Old Timoteo Borges is their daddy. They asked me to come and see 'em. Bet I could marry either one of them. If I don't make money in Nicaragua I'm coming back and marry me a coffee plantation. A man could take either one of 'em to the States and they wouldn't put 'em in the Jim Crow car on the trains."

He was still burbling to Hughie as they strolled over to the river bank and looked about for a canoeman to take them over. It perks a fellow up to make any sort of a jane, unintroduced, and it sets his spirits to bubbling when he finds they are high class. Also, it downcasts a friendly hearer in about like proportion. It's the old, old jealousy of man against man, a hangover possibly from before the days of monogamy.

Hughie felt depressed. Social codes made by jealous old fossils in all lands forbade the practice of butting in. Yet, perhaps, all men in their hearts and souls desire to be Don Juans. They want to be brave. They want to be rich. And they want to love and be loved. At any rate, deep down in Hughie Rose was this desire. It was second only to his desire to swagger about and be known as a brave and quite reckless young man. He had the looks to be a Don Juan; for ladies fall for men of his type. He had practiced on the draw until he was quicker by a slight fraction than Blanton, himself, who was no slouch on quick drawing and firing with the thumb. He was quick on his feet. But he didn't have sand in his craw. That was what was the matter.

THEY crossed the river in a canoe and hit the long trail across Honduras. The first night they stopped with Nigger Knight at his mine. All trail hitters stopped with this Alabama negro and he treated white men like kings. Jennie, his wife, was as good a cook as ever baked a hot biscuit or turned a roast. Both were the type that the new negro hates. Knight, with his brass rimmed glasses, looked the part of a stage Uncle Tom. His wife was like the negro cook pictured on the pancake flour packages. And between them they had a million invested in U. S. Government bonds in a safety deposit box in Mobile. Knight had stumbled onto this gold mine years before. He was a negro tramp, possibly the only black T. T. T. ever in Central America. Money made no difference with him. He was a mighty fine old man and deserves these few words.

So the two stopped with him, ate his grub, smoked his cigars, drank his imported whisky in moderation, slept in clean beds and hit the trail at daylight in the morning. They crossed the border into Honduras at the regular crossing, as they had nothing contraband on them and did not have to dodge through the brush for a few miles and sneak over, as more than one has had to do. They stopped at native tambos, slept out a number of times, came into Tegucigalpa and rested for a couple of days at the Hotel Nacional, and hit the trail south again.

In a couple of weeks they were in Nicaragua and using great caution. Zelaya, they found, had control of the river steamers on the San Juan and also the lake steamers on the Gran Lago and Lake Managua. General Estrada had control of a short length of the national railway, the Ferrocarril del Pacifico de Nicaragua, between Corinto and Chinandega. He had his headquarters at Chinandega at the time. The two men managed to sneak through Zelaya's lines without being haled before him and, by doing a bit of hiding and dodging, reached General Estrada's headquarters in less than a month from the time they left Guatemala City. It is a tremendous trip despite the fact the distance looks short on the usual map. There are mountains, rivers, swamps, bayous, morasses, all of which have dangers of several sorts. There are jaguars and pumas, snakes and alligators, mosquitos and insects, chiggers and fleas, sawgrass, nettles, briers. Also a man usually carries a temperature after the first few days, from malaria. He is fortunate if he doesn't get blackwater or yellowjack, to say nothing of bubonic plague and a few other epidemics. But they made it with fair success after average pain, loss of sleep and skin.

They found General Estrada seated under an oxhide stretched on four posts just outside of the city of Chinandega. A strip of red adorned their hatbands and they had been asking directions from each gang of Liberals they passed until they came to the exact headquarters of the revolutionary chief. Off to one side was a cluster of palm thatched huts thrown up for the general's staff officers.

General Estrada gaped at the two as they came limping up.

"*¿Es usted General Estrada?*" Blanton asked.

"Yes, and I speek it the English. What ees eet you desire, sirs?"

"We came down to put in with you. Come from Guatemala City. You know Lee Christmas, General Lee Christmas? We were with him in the foreign legion."

"General Christmas! He ees frient of mine. I like him more so than brudder! Ees he coming to join me?"

"He's waiting for the jack President Cabrera owes him. Also he's trying to get him to send soldiers across. Lee is for you strong. Hopes you win. We come on ahead and he will come later."

General Estrada got up and embraced the two men impulsively. He was a tall, lean faced man with a drooping mustache, dressed in khaki, black leggings, and a wide brimmed straw hat.

"I'm so glad," he kept murmuring. "Hongry?" he asked suddenly.

"We shore are, general. Haven't had a square meal since we left Nigger Knight's."

Estrada yelled and clapped his hands together. A barefooted fellow dashed out of one of the near-by huts and trotted over. The general hurriedly gave him orders for preparing a meal, and the boy trotted back. The general drew up a bench to the table for the two men, so that they were opposite him, and began pointing to the map and asking questions.

Rose and Blanton, having just passed through the Conservative lines, were able to give him a lot of valuable data. Estrada, in spite of his poor attempts at speaking English, was one of the shrewdest generals in all Central America. When the boy came over and reported that the meal was ready, General Estrada walked over with them and sat at the table while they ate, smiling at the gusto they displayed over the food and bottle of wine, and plying them now and again with shrewd questions. When they came out of the hut they found a number of young officers hanging about. Estrada called them up and introduced the two as officers who had had experience with General Lee Christmas, daring men and renowned fighters. Blanton glanced brazenly from man to man and drew himself erect. Officers they certainly had been, for Lee Christmas always gave men who joined his "legion" some sort of title as a matter of form. As fighters it remained to be seen.

Estrada's thin front line, which the two lads had passed through, was a bit grotesque as figured by modern standards. There were no trenches, no telegraphic communication, no extensive observation system. It was merely a series of makeshift camps ranging from west to east. It did not begin at the Pacific and it dissolved to nothing a bit to the east. Some twenty miles intervened between this and the front of Zelaya's forces, and the two armies depended to a great extent on rumor picked up more or less by chance from old men and noncombatants as they passed back and forth.

A majority of the peons of both sides had their families with them, and these moved along behind the armies with the ox carts and general impedimenta. The press gangs of both sides were busy capturing and bringing in all men and boys of fighting age and inducting them into the service. "Fighting age" in this land means anything between eight and eighty, and there is no exaggeration in this statement. As loth as the peon is to fight, and dodging it as he does, he instantly becomes a bloodthirsty warrior after having a gun shoved into his hands, and being sent to the front. The work, as a rule, is hand to hand combat with carbine and machete, the old fashioned sort of warfare which requires a bit more than usual courage.

GENERAL ESTRADA was contemplating a move forward. He was getting supplies from the United States through the port of Corinto. A big lumber company was backing him with money, on the promise that if he won he would give the company concessions on vast tracts of mahogany, dye woods, and logwoods. Another American outfit was backing General Zelaya, the president who led the government troops, to protect certain railroad and banking concessions they already had. Neither side at this time had been able to get the U. S. Marines to take a hand, although both factions had been yelling "canal rights are in danger" at the top of their lungs. And this goes a bit more into politics than there is need of. The intention is to show that General Estrada, the revolutionary chieftain, was getting his supplies through the port of Corinto and out to his army by rail, while, on the other hand, President Zelaya was getting his supplies from the eastern coast by river steamer up the San Juan River and the lake steamers on the Great Lake, or Gran Lago. His back was not against the wall, as the saying goes, but was against the shores of the lake and the Nicaraguan side of the San Juan River.

And mark this fact well: Zelaya's rear was more important than his front. Guns, cartridges, cannon, food, and money were pouring in from the rear. Thus he gave ground, and gave ground with but slight pretense of battle as the revolutionary army advanced toward Managua, the capital. He was drawing General Estrada farther and farther away from his base of supplies, whereas, on the other hand, with but slight transport he could put his own sinews to the front. Besides the antiquated railroad, transportation in Nicaragua is a question of ox cart, burro back, and Indian packer. So as General Estrada advanced the army, his connection with his base became more and more precarious, depending merely on the two streaks of rust of the national railroad from Corinto; whereas General Zelaya was using the ships lying at anchor in the river and lake as floating arsenals and food warehouses.

Lieutenant Blanton and Lieutenant Rose had distinguished themselves as much as possible in the small fighting that had been going on. Blanton, especially, was aggressive. His small body of barefoots was always in the van. More than once he chased Conservatives into their own camps before retiring. General Estrada had praised him for his bravery but had cautioned him against his recklessness. The men under Rose, also, had shown considerable bravery. His mere presence instilled courage into them, and if his command was second to Blanton's mad dashes, it was well ahead of that led by any local officer.

Hughie closely watched his partner and tried to imitate him. He swaggered a bit, growled gruffly, and managed, in a way, to carry the part off. Yet in his heart and soul he died a thousand deaths. For nights at a time he did not sleep a wink. In battle the sound of a whining bullet set his heart to thumping and his knees to quaking. The sight of mangled bodies sickened him so he could not eat his meals. His imagination was so vivid that it intensified and made worse the actual horrors he encountered. War at the best is a messy business.

In such little fighting as had taken place, Lieutenant Rose had seen mangled bodies, had heard awful screams of pain as men were chopped to pieces with machetes or mutilated for sport, had smelled blood and ordure, putrid flesh. No war is precisely as one sees it on a moving picture screen. The smell of burning bodies, after an affray when they were packed into rows and set fire to, gagged and sickened this timid American youth. Blanton, on the other hand, jested and laughed. His nerves were very deep down. They did not tremble, quiver, and vibrate like those of his partner. He did not, could not, understand the awful battle Hughie Rose was waging with himself to keep from turning tail and deserting at every small brush with the enemy.

They both had earned their commissions as lieutenants before Estrada's army backed Zelaya's into the capital and entrenched itself in semicircular lines before the city.

Behind the town was the short length of railroad running to the lake where the loaded river steamers lay. And running from that also, at Zelaya's rear, was the San Juan. Zelaya could, if it came to it, forfeit the capital and fall back further on his ammunition and food, and be in better position at that; for the capital had been impoverished and gutted months before.

The revolutionary chief had managed to maintain the railroad in running order. But now the length was quite long. The rolling stock was dilapidated, the track badly in need of repair, and the natives who manned the trains were inexperienced. Should it occur to Zelaya to send men around to blow up a bridge, wreck a mile or so of the track, or derail a moving train to block it, the revolutionists would be forced to retreat to the Pacific coast. No great military genius is required to see this thing. Yet Zelaya did not think of it at the time.

The revolutionary chief, General Estrada, pondered it much. He also studied and thought about the boats and ships that lay at the piers in Granada on the lake and were anchored at intervals down the San Juan. A plan occurred to him and he sent for *Teniente* Blanton and *Teniente* Rose.

THEY found him sitting at a table under an oxhide, and as there were several of his officers lounging about, he called the two men off to one side out of hearing. The three squatted on the ground while they discussed it. It was in regard to blowing up these boats of the enemy that were giving such power from the rear. After a bit of beating about the bush General Estrada came down to the crux of his plan. He expressed it in Spanish.

"I have absolutely no one I trust as I do you. I am afraid to entrust even mention of the mission to my own staff officers. The Nicaraguan talks too much. The report would get out before they were through. And if Zelaya caught them they would tell where they were going and what they intended to do. He would place heavy guards on the vessels. I know from reports most of them are unguarded. It is very dangerous. Sure death would result if you were captured."

The trio squatted in a circle with faces close together. General Estrada's eyes blinked back and forth from one face to the other. Lieutenant Rose dropped his eye and studied the ground. He had never had any experience with dynamite. It was ticklish work, this that the general proposed. It meant sneaking from ship to ship in the dark in a frail canoe, attaching the blasts, lighting the fuses and getting away. He knew, also, that Blanton had had no experience whatever with explosives. Furthermore he knew that the Gran Lago and the San Juan River were teeming with alligators and sharks, to say nothing of boa constrictors, electric and penetrating eels. His mind, racing as in a dream, saw the whole project with myriad added, horrible details.

Blanton's eyes were shrewd as he peered at the general.

"*Seguro que si!* We can pull the thing off for you! We come through that way and know the paths back. But it's mighty dangerous. Takes guts. Takes slick work to get there and touch them off and then get back, but—" he coughed slightly—"what's in it for us? What's it worth to you? How much cash and what military rating do we get? That's coming right down to brass tacks."

"*Seguro, seguro.* I know none of us fight for fun or risk our lives for fun. The cause is just. President Zelaya is a fiend and I fight him as a patriot, but I am looking ahead to being next president also and there is money in the job. The company in your country that is backing me expects to spend half a million. It takes money to make things go."

He paused and figured for a moment.

"I will give you, between you, when you return after the work is done, twenty-five thousand in American currency. I have it in my trunk. Also I will make both of you majors."

Blanton put his hand out deprecatingly.

"Not enough! Make it twenty-five thousand apiece and make us colonels and we will do the thing up nice and handy. Ain't that right, Hughie?"

Rose nodded.

"*Esta bien!* It is worth it. I will give you a hundred each on account."

He fumbled in his breast pocket and drew forth a wallet, plucked out a couple of yellow bills and handed one to each of the men. They thanked him and he shook hands with each of them as they arose.

"You got any dynamite?" asked Blanton.

"I have a trunkful in my tent. It is light and each of you can carry a hundred sticks. Ten sticks in the right place will sink the light built, rusty ships; and a bomb on the decks of those where the powder and shells are piled will explode them. Better go to Granada, sink the ones at the docks, paddle along the shore to where the water pours down the San Juan and sink the others as you drift by at night."

The three strolled across and entered his tent. He proffered a bottle of aguardiente. The two took a pull out of it and he took one himself. He then knelt and opened a trunk lined with cotton batting and filled with pungent sticks of dynamite. He counted out two hundred sticks and the men knelt with him and helped stuff them into two brown sacks Estrada took from beneath his cot and unfolded. Estrada had been planning on the thing for the past ten days, and although the price was double what he calculated on, the men had not failed him. Nor is there anything to be criticized about the matter. War is war and he was proving himself a shrewd general. Now, if only the men could do it!

Within half an hour after General Estrada had broached the subject the two men strolled away to the west with packs on their backs, pistols in their holsters, and machetes in their belts. Blanton walked to the fore, stalking with head erect. Rose followed with face peering on the ground ahead of his slouching steps.

"Hey, Len!" he called.

Blanton, busy with his own thoughts, did not hear until he called the second time. He paused while Rose came up.

"You know this here's a pretty ticklish job we've bit off. I've been thinking it over. It's an awful risk. Further, we've got to get all the way back to collect."

"Aw, for the love of God! You going to start all that crape hanging and belly-aching? Might have knowed it!"

"Well it's a fact," stammered Rose.

"S'pose it is. What of it, eh? Here we got a chance to pull out twenty-five grand apiece in four or five days and get a commission as colonel. Colonel Blanton! Won't that make 'em sit up in Austin? We can make some splurge with this jack and we will pull out. People all over Texas will be looking at us with popping eyes. I was thinking about it when you called me and began yowling. Be reasonable, feller! My Lord!"

Hughie looked down and swallowed a time or two. His Adam's apple was pressing up into his throat. Blanton felt sorry for the lad. There was real affection between the two.

"Ah!" he snorted. "Don't be askeard. It don't get you nothin'. I ain't afraid and I don't see why you are."

"I know you ain't afraid," agreed Hughie, smiling wanly. "I've noticed things don't affect you like they do me. I seem to look ahead and see all that could happen and suffer them vicariously before they occur. You are without fear. I am awfully afraid and I have a terrible time. I'm just built that way I reckon."

"Aw, buck up! Watch me, do as I do, stick with me. You'll get over it sometime and you will be like I am."

HE SET off in the lead and Hughie followed at his heels. They skirted the lower shore of Lake Managua and followed the west bank along the narrow beach between the leaning coconuts and the muddy lake water. Alligators lying on the sand ahead grunted and slipped into the mud out of sight. Sunning snakes dashed up the beach and disappeared into the rank undergrowth. Lizards and iguanas scuttled up the tree trunks, rattling their scaly skins against the bark as they disappeared amid the foliage. Neither paid much attention. They had seen uncountable millions of such things on the trail trip a few months before. Sundown found them opposite Managua, whose lights glowed fitfully across the silver surface of the water. A crescent moon rode in an indigo sky.

They slogged along, now and then stumbling over some fallen tree trunk, now and then slipping into water to their knees. At midnight they reached the narrow strip of water that ran from the small lake into the larger one, an *estero* too shallow for steamer passage but used for canoe and *pango* traffic. Several deserted canoes were tied to stakes driven into the sand. Their owners were probably in one or the other army or skylarking in Managua. The two appropriated the largest, bundled their packs in, and, after finding paddles hidden in the weeds, set off down the channel with the current. They made good time.

Three hours later they were attaching a bundle of dynamite sticks to the off side of a decrepit lake steamer moored to the Granada wharf. They cut the fuse a foot long, attached the cap, shoved it among the sticks, and paddled to the next vessel. The moon had gone down and they worked by starlight. The paddles made not a sound as the black canoe eased along and the men worked silently. The half dozen charges were quickly attached and the canoe edged back to the first one. A match flared in a cupped hand as Blanton lit the fuse. It spluttered and the canoe nosed to the next and the next. Six little flickers of light sparkled at the water line for a moment as the canoe shot away toward the entrance to the San Juan. They were barely a hundred yards away when the first explosion occurred, sharp as the crack of a cannon. A lone watchman yelled and leaped to the wharf. Then came a thud as two others exploded simultaneously, followed by the other three. Water poured into the rents and the boats began settling.

Up in Granada rifles banged and men began running and shouting. A church bell began clanging furiously. Lights and torches were appearing in all the streets. The watchmen from the boats ran into the streets shouting the report that the enemy was bombarding from the lake. It was some time before the truth of what had happened was known amid all the reports and counter reports. The torches and lanterns finally showed the vessels sunk below the surface with but the spars and superstructures showing.

In the meantime Blanton and Rose were paddling furiously down the San Juan. With the current and with the paddles they made good headway and soon the black hulk of a boat ahead caused them to back paddle and head to the shore. Crouching in the canoe they tied small bundles of dynamite and attached the fuses. They then shoved off again and drifted with the current out in the stream behind the moored boats.

Gray dawn was just appearing down the river to the east. They were passing the first boat. Blanton stood up and set himself to throw. The match flared, his arm went back and out and the bomb whirled its flickering light around and around as it sped through the air. Seventy five feet away it landed on the deck of the boat, a river boat with the appearance of a tug but of very shallow draught. The flare of the dynamite when it exploded ignited a stack of powder sacks which flared upward with a deep roar. Men began to yell from the other decks. Rifles spatted at the two men standing in the canoe. Hughie Rose landed his bomb on the deck of the next small stern-wheeler as Blanton plied the paddle. Thus were four river steamers and a barge dynamited.

Down the San Juan raced the canoe. Soldiers were dashing out of camps and running through the grass and wild banana bushes along the shore. The two men were widening the gap between them when a line of canoes appeared in the river ahead. Dropping the paddles they knelt and began to fire with the pistols. Rifles and pistols answered them. In a moment the two men were slashing right and left with their machetes as the canoes closed in around them. The canoe upset and they were flung into the water. Men sprang in on top of them while others grappled for them.

The entire struggling mass of canoes and men drifted toward the shore. The men who had raced along the bank came abreast and dashed in. The two Americans were dragged out, struggling and lashing right and left. They were disarmed, and as the sun appeared over the jungle in the east, they were being driven along a path toward the capital at a trot with their hands tied behind them and prodding machetes urging them from the rear.

AT ELEVEN o'clock they were dragged into the presence of General Zelaya, the president, who had received the report from Granada a short while before and who was in a terrible rage.

"I will burn them alive!" he roared. "Ring the church bells, send couriers shouting through the streets, gather the people on the shore of Lake Managua to witness the death of these gringo dogs!"

"Why not shoot us like men, General?" asked Rose.

"No! Like dogs you shall burn. And the whole world shall know it!"

Rose's blond hair was matted with mud and twigs. His face was chalky white and his lips blue. The pupils of his eyes were dilated until they filled the entire iris. Intense fear was gnawing him. Yet he was not shivering and quaking. He had got beyond that stage. He had died a thousand deaths on the way over the trail from the scene of their capture and had reached an ecstasy of fear. Blanton's mouth was half open and he was gaping. Unimaginative as he was, he had no trouble in visualizing their end. Reports of the numerous stake parties the president had held had reached the ears of both of them. There was little doubt but what he would carry out the threat.

"Is there an American consul in the city?" Rose inquired.

"Keep that dog quiet!" roared the president.

Bells were ringing throughout the city. The shrill voices of the couriers could be heard crying the report. In a few moments after the two had been driven into the gateway of Campo Marte they were driven out. Machetes and bayonets were prodded and thrust at them as they trotted along the middle of the street.

Behind the huddle that surrounded them, waddled President Zelaya on his short, thick legs. His huge square face was livid and he growled oaths from his throat. He was a throwback, a man ape in uniform. Long since he had outstripped in brutality the noted dwarf, Castro, of Venezuela. He had committed every crime in the category, from incest to patricide. The two men possibly deserved to die, but this beast did not deserve to be their executioner.

At the shore of the lake a section of railroad rail had been driven into the sand. A sea of people swarmed around as the two were chained on either side, facing each other. Pieces of packing boxes and bundles of faggots were passed forward and the pile grew about them to their armpits. The soldiers cleared a small circle and Zelaya raised his voice and began to speak. As he proceeded he worked himself into a frenzy, swung his arms about and frothed from the mouth. When he paused and stood glaring at them from bloodshot eyes, a native priest in a black robe stepped forward and began to chant in Latin from a book he held close to his eyes.

Zelaya struck a match and shoved it into the tinder at the base of the pile. The two youths had been staring over their shoulders and watched each move. As the fire crackled they gazed into each other's face.

Blanton's chin was wabbling and tears were standing in his eyes.

"An awful way to die," he choked. "This is terrible. It ain't human to do us this way. We're going to suffer awful before we go."

Hughie Rose had died a thousand deaths in his imagination. Now that he was face to face with it he met fear and conquered. His face was chalk but his eyes glowed like coals and his mouth was set as firmly as a gap in granite.

"Don't break down, old boy! It's hell but it will be over in a minute. Let's die game!"

Blanton stiffened and stared at him. This partner of his was a man at last.

The flames roared upward and enshrouded them. From within came a piping cheer.

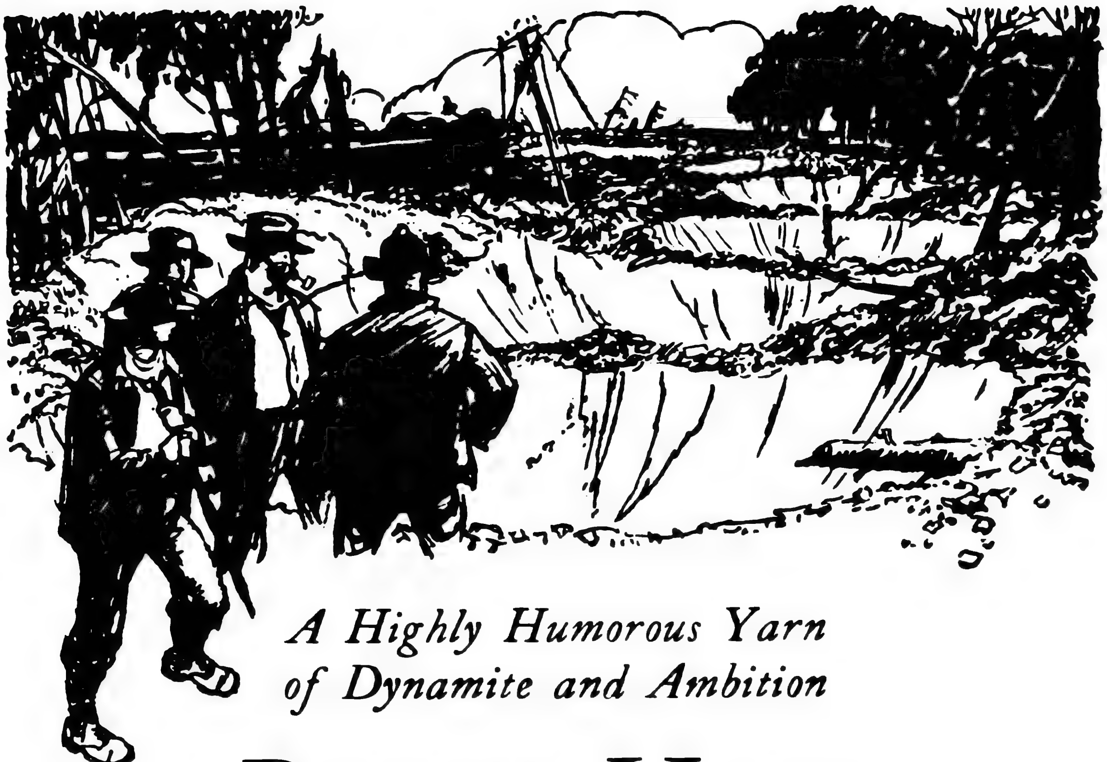
"Viva Estrada!"

And a coarser voice joined him.

"Viva la revolución!"

Then two figures moved and writhed in the glowing coals.

They both died game. They died game enough so that when the report reached General Estrada he launched an offense that swept Zelaya from the city in one afternoon, and continued until his forces were scattered and he himself was tearing on horseback across the jungles for the sanctuary of British Honduras. They died game enough so that men to this day will take you down and show you the very spot where they were burned alive with a cheer on their lips. I myself have seen the spot many times and the memory of it has helped me more than once to carry on.



A Highly Humorous Yarn of Dynamite and Ambition

PLUG HAT

By ALBERT STENGELSEN

TWO things I learnt that time I run a clearing crew for the Overland Railroad Company, and one of 'em was that it don't always pay to do exactly as you're told, and the other was that there ain't much difference sometimes between success and failure. Just a little more'n the ordinary of something and you're a success, and just a mite less and you're a failure. Or the other way around. And it was them two extra sticks of dynamite that done it.

The Overland Company was buildin' a road through Clark County. I'd been blastin' stumps on the old man's homestead—which I'd got tired of, seein' as how there was still a lotta stumps, and not much homestead left. Anyway that's what the old man said kind of sarcastic when he come out to see how I was gettin' along.

So, pickin' up my gun one day, I ambles off to where the right-of-way has been surveyed. Five or six miles from home I runs into a gang of men. I sashays up to 'em, and what's the good word I wants to know, after I'd broadcast a how-de-do.

One big feller—I finds out later his name is Mike—looks me over kinda thoughtful, then he rolls a cud of chewin' tobacco around in his mouth and spits a coupla rods.

"Clearin' crew," he says like he's begrudgin' every word of it, "an' we've been waitin' all day fer the foreman."

So that was it. The rest of the gang hangs around lookin' kinda tired of the whole business. But there's one guy that don't look tired. He's a little fat feller, an' he wears a plug hat. He comes bustlin' over to where we're standin'. He hauls out a watch.

"If that alleged foreman don't show up in five minutes," he growls, "he ain't gonna have no more job than a cottontail."

Then he hustles off again, busier'n a candidate in election time.

I looks at the roly-poly little feller, curious like, then at the big guy in a questionin' way.

"Sooprintendent," Mike says, and spits a coupla rods again. He sure was a spitter if there ever was one.

Well, we sits around more or less sociable for a spell, me just listenin' while the rest of 'em talk about the foreman bein' away. Pretty soon the superintendent comes trottin' back again. He looks us over cold like.

"Any of you birds know anything about dynamite?" he asks, like he's just darin' us to tell him about it.

The rest of 'em kinda aches around, not sayin' anything, so I speaks right up.

"I sorta figger I've learnt the low-down on dynamite," I says. "I been doin' nothin' but that mostly fer the last six months."

"And I s'pose," he says kinda sarcastic, "that you're a expert at it?"

"Well," I says, "I don't want to brag none. But the Bolsheviks offered me the job of blowin' up Russia," I says.

He looks at me real careful fer a minute. Then I can see he makes up his mind quick, like that.

"Take charge of the crew," he says. "You're the new foreman."

He turns to the others.

"He's the one that runs the show," he says. "And if that Callaghan shows up, give 'im the job of peelin' spuds fer the cook. Maybe that'll teach him to be on time from now on," he says.

Well, I wondered what there was about a spud peelin' job that would teach a guy to be on time, but I didn't have time to get it figgered out complete, on account the little fat guy is doin' a lotta talkin'.

"Your job," he says, "is to clear that right-of-way of all stones, stumps, trees, brush and et cetery," he says. "Here's yer crew, and back there is the tools and the dynamite," he says. "Yer pay as foreman will be three-fifty a day and grub."

I nods and waits fer more. The men is hangin' around, lookin' at me suspicious like, but don't say nothin'.

"Clear the right-of-way," the fat guy goes on. "I want it clean as a whistle," he says. "Blast or cut or grub or do it any way ye wants to, but get it cleared slick and clean," he says.

"All right," I agrees.

"And don't be scared to use plenty dynamite," he says. "Always put in enough. In fact," he says, "when you got in what you consider a fair sized load," he says, "put in two extra sticks fer me."

"Yes, sir," I says, to show I'd took it all in.

Well, we jaws around some more and finally he goes. As he's walkin' off, he turns around and says:

"Well, good luck to you."

"Thanks," I says.

"And use plenty," he calls back.

"I will," I promises.

"And don't fergit the two extra sticks," he yells.

"I won't," I hollers.

And with that he was gone.

SO NOW to work. I takes in a hole in the belt an' ambles over to the six guys who is the crew. They all looks at me, and don't say nothin'. I looks at them and says the same fer a minute.

I'd worked in the woods three winters, and on threshing crews, and once I'd been bartender in a tough saloon in a lumber town; an' besides I'd done some homesteadin' with the old folks. But runnin' a railroad construction crew was a new one on me. I wasn't sure just how to go at it to get things started right. But I makes a guess at the proper way, and I says:

"The first number on the program will be a elimination contest," I says. "Any bozo here what don't figger he's goin' to do exactly like he's told, step forward and get his oats," I says.

Well, two or three of 'em straighten up an' look sort of interested.

"Want to fight, huh?" Mike asks.

I ain't a arguin' man.

"Take off yer coat," I says.

He does. Then we goes to it.

Mike was a good man. And he done his durnedest. But he wasn't used to fightin' lumberjack style, so it don't take long till he lays there blinkin' at me kinda surprised. I stands still and tries not to puff till he gets to his feet. He wobbles a little, but grins friendly like.

He dusts himself off and looks at the other five men.

"Next," he says.

By that time I'd got my breath pretty good.

"Anybody else in this crowd that's got any hefty arguments to advance," I says, "speak yer pieces now and get yer necks broke more complete later."

They seemed kinda bashful about comin' forward, so Mike butts in.

"Aw, hell," he says, pickin' up his coat and puttin' it on, "lets git to work."

So I fixes 'em up with tools and we're ready to begin. I takes Mike with me to help do the drillin'. The rest of 'em I put at axes, grub hoes and brush scythes. They starts hackin' away real enthusiastic.

Mike and me has our work cut out fer us. A big elm, about four feet thick, stands plunk in the middle of the right-of-way, just where they'd quit work that night before.

I pokes my drill into the bark of the elm.

"This here gooseberry bush," I points out, "is departin' fer points unknown."

Pretty soon we has her all fixed, and Mike puts in a pretty good load of dynamite. He means well. He's generous hearted, too. Besides, he wasn't payin' fer that dynamite, so why shouldn't he be? But I feels it necessary to show him who's leadin' the procession. So I says:

"Did you put in plenty, Mike, like he said?"

"Look fer yerself," he says.

Which I did, havin' done so before.

"But ain't you fergittin' something, Mike?" I reminds him.

"Well," he says, sorta dubious. "I ain't tamped it yet."

"How about them two extra sticks?" I asks.

He looks at me as if he ain't sure I'm there or not. Then he gazes up and down to make sure I am. After that he seems to get his mind made up all right.

"Oh, yes," he says, "I'd forgot them two extra sticks."

"It ain't too late yet," I says kindly.

We hauls out two more sticks an' pokes 'em in.

"This here sapling," I tells Mike, "is going fer a long ride. It's going to be both high and wide—also handsome."

We strings out the wire, and connects it up. Then we calls the men and moves off a few miles, and I pushes the switch.

Well, it was good dynamite. A lot better'n what the old man had. There sure is a lot of difference in dynamite.

The noise was sorta high class too. That guy Jupiter Pluvy, or something, what handles the thunder, is a piker compared to what this was. Put together all the lightnin' and thunder I've ever heard and they'd sound like a cap pistol missin' fire, if you put it alongside that load of dynamite going off. There was a cloud of smoke and dirt and stuff that reached a coupla miles up in the air.

After the sky has cleared some, and the sun begins to come out again, we preambles back to where that tree has been. It ain't there any more. There was some other things missin' too.

WELL, we goes back to work, clearing and grubbing. Every once in a while we runs into a stump, or maybe even a tough clump of willow that's too hard to grub. So we fixes up a blast and blows 'em to Kingdom Come, only it shoulda been Kingdom Gone instead. Anyway we couldn't never find much of 'em left, so where was they, I ask you? Sometimes, though, a part got, as you might say, onattached from the main body and went skeeterin' over on one side. That was awful tough on some cows and calves that was hangin' around. One of 'em met up with a stone or something that must've been under one of them willow clumps. She was still layin' there when we come back, and there wasn't no postal mortum.

"Yes, sir," says I, "curiosity killed the cat."

"Mebbe so," Mike grunts. "But it takes dynamite to talk convincin' to a cow."

We drags some brush and trees together, and made a barbyque out of her. But we decides mutual like that we wasn't hungry. I don't like cow anyway when it's on the hoof.

So we goes on laborin' and clearin' according to what the little guy has said. Slick and clean, that's what he wanted. "Slick and clean's the word," thinks I

Once in a while we stops to rest fer a few minutes.

"Good dynamite," says I.

"Not bad," Mike says, lookin' back to where we'd come.

It was good lookin', I'll say that. If a movie company had owned that right-of-way, they'd have had a five reel war right away.

Well, we comes to a nice big rock just on one side, near the line, and we gets it all drilled and tamped. After we had plugged in the two extra sticks, we string out the wire and move off a coupla miles to where the batteries is. I looks around to count noses.

One's missing. It's Red. I look around

and see that he's kept right on going when we stopped. He ain't planning to stay with us at all.

"Hey, you Red!" I yells. "Where you going to?"

"Ain't goin' to," he hollers back. "Just goin' away from!"

What can you do with a guy like that? So I lets him go and gets ready to set 'er off.

I pushes the plunger, an' if I do say it myself, there's a terrible lot of et cetery around that stone. The whole thing's up in the air fer quite a while.

When we starts ramblin' back, I leads off, with Mike just behind. We has to do a lot of skipping about, on account of not wanting to fall into some of them holes the two extra sticks has left here and there.

I turns to Mike.

"Boss wanted us to get everything out of the way, and we're sure doing it," I says.

"We sure are," Mike agrees.

"Not much left here," I says.

"There sure ain't," Mike answers.

"I don't imagine they ever had a crew that made such a good job of it," I suggests.

"I doubt it," Mike replies.

"Wonder what chance there is of gettin' up with a railroad," I says, careless like.

"Well," says Mike thoughtfully, "I hear as how they hire a awful lot of vice-presidents."

Mike has worked on the railroad before, so he ought to be on to the ropes. I thinks over what he's just told me.

"Does a vice-president have to know anything about dynamite?" I asks.

Mike nods and then he spits up into the top of a tree.

"Yeah, I expect it might be necessary fer him to know something about it," he says.

"Pretty good pay?" I wonders.

"Guess so," Mike says. "They always ride around in private cars anyway."

I didn't say nothin' more about it, but I'm sure thinkin'. I knows that most great men has started from the bottom. Dynamitin' was good enough as far as it went, but it didn't go far. I was lookin' ahead. Fer a minute none of us says anything. Then Mike says sudden—he must've been thinkin' of the same thing:

"I could handle the rest of the vice-president job all right, but I ain't so sure of the plug hat."

"Plug hat?" I asks. "Got to wear one?"

He nods.

"Yeah," he says. "They all do anyway."

I thinks that over. But, thinks I, if a plug hat is part of the job, a plug hat it is then. So I dismisses it from my mind. But I'm gettin' impatient to have the little fat guy come back and see how well we're doin'.

So, crawling and hopping between blast holes, we gets back to the scene of the last earthquake.

IT LOOKS kind of discouragin' fer the railroad business. I stands there wondering if they'll have to build a trestle across, or will they try to fill it up. Any way you take it, it's a pretty good job of cleanin'.

I looks at it a minute, then I turns to Mike.

"Holes," I says confidential like, "is secondary with us."

"We ain't interested in holes nohow," he agrees.

"He said to use plenty," I goes on. "He said to use two extra sticks fer him."

"That's what we're doin'," Mike affirms.

"We sure are," I says, and we sets to work again.

But before very long we notices a long, stilt-legged feller with whiskers something like a billy goat's comin' over to where we was.

I study him real careful and then pokes Mike.

"By the look in his eye," I says, "he craves attention right away."

"He's prob'ly lookin' fer that bossy which is now supplyin' milk fer the Heavenly Host. Good thing we creemated her under that brush pile."

I been lookin' the feller over as he comes stridin' along.

"Remember what the little fat guy said?" I inquires. "Slick an' clean, that was it. Wonder did he mean that inclooSive, as you might say, so as to cover farmers too?"

"Couldn't mean nothin' else but," Mike says positive. "Anyway a man's a lot more trouble'n a tree any day. More uncertain, kind of. We better clean 'im up along with the rest of the rubbish."

The guy is steppin' high and wide, and he starts in when he's still a couple of rods away.

"What in the name of the jumpin' sidewinders are you murderin' polecats tryin' to do?" he howls.

"We're bringin' civilization to your door, neighbor," I says. "Soon the nation's commerce will be rollin' by your very kitchen. We're the pioneers fer the iron horse," I says.

"I'll pioneer you!" he yells, throwin' off his hat and stampin' on it.

I gathers that he means to lick us all, one by one, startin' with the foreman. So I answers very politely.

"Is it clubs, axes, swords or fists?"

That made him madder'n ever, and fer a while he's real fluent. He's talkin' barnyard English, an' I could pick out a word here and there. Pretty soon he runs out of things to say, an' about that time he makes a dive fer me. We engages in moral combat, an' may the best man win.

That guy'd been educated proper, I'll say that. Besides, he was kind of long an' strung out, so I couldn't get holt of him all at onct. Finally I hooks myself onto one of his legs, and thinks I, come Nell or fair weather, here I stay. He gives a heave and a ho, and spraddles the other leg way out, an' that was his finish. I guess he'd forgot them shell holes, he was that attentive to me. Anyway, that one leg goes over the edge, and the other follers kind of sudden like when I lets go. So he departs from hence without sayin' good-by. He has a nice landslide all by himself, and lands in a little puddle down in the bottom.

I stands up on the edge breathin' fast.

"Shall I give you some more?" I puffs.

The farmer don't say nothin'. Mike, over on the other side, answers for him.

"Not any more, thankin' ye for the offer just the same," says he. "You've already give till it hurts," he says.

Well, the farmer leaves finally, so mad he's shiverin'. He sure was an ugly bozo. And as he goes he says he's goin' to sue the railroad for attempted murder and lots of other things. We tells him to sue ahead. The railroad don't belong to us.

With that we proceeds to clean some more right-of-way. It wasn't so long before we come to a big oak leanin' over. We gets after the spreadin' giant with both hands. She's the biggest oak I ever see up in that country, and the hardest. But we finally gets her all ready drilled and tamped not fergittin' the two extra sticks.

One thing I'm glad of: we'd got to another farm. I didn't like that whiskers feller. I'm sorta peaceful and don't like battlin' with my feller man.

Well, the batteries worked all O. K. And the dynamite seems to improve with age. It goes off kinda slow and easy like a volcano, or a earthquake, or something. Then it begins to do things to the surroundin' scenery.

The tree goes off with a lotta relatives, just like a bird in the fall of the year. And it must be figgerin' on gettin' transplanted, because it takes most of the real estate with it. Last I see of the whole thing it's movin' away like a black comet with a twig in front, which is the tree leadin' the procession.

After a while I hears a middlin' loud bang, like Gabriel'd hocked his horn and bought a sledge hammer. Then I looks. The tree had come back. It'd gone right up an come nearly right down.

It landed in the farmer's barn that we was comin' to. There it was, shingles flyin' in seventeen or maybe twenty directions, and the roof all caved in. The tree is stickin' proud as you please right up out of the top of the barn, wavin' branches kind of exhilaratin' like.

And things was happening to the fauna and flora of that barn. Through one little square window up on the side of the wall come a pig. A streak and a squeal, and pig and window was gone.

Out through the barn door come a mule shootin'. He's movin' fast and not stoppin' fer transfers. He was bringin' the manger with him. And a spotted calf was hanging by a rope around its neck to the other end of the manger. Mule and manger disappears over the hill in six seconds flat, the calf stickin' straight back in the air, tongue hangin' out.

And then a man comes staggerin' out, rubbing his eyes and lookin' awful surprised. It's the hired man; we woke him up.

AFTER a while things quiet down some, and we starts back. By the time we gets back to where this last clearin' has took place, we see we've got another visitor. He don't say much, and

I can't think of the right words to fit the occasion, so we stands around awful sorrowful, looking into the depths o' misery, as you might say.

Ever see the Grand Cañon? Well, you know a feller lookin' into it gets a feelin' that he don't want to talk or nothing. I felt the same way lookin' down into that hole, only I had twice as little to say as I had the first time I see the Cañon.

Mike comes pokin' up to me. He gasps kind of faint once or twice, and then he says:

"How in the name of the holy he goat will they ever get that filled?"

"This is the dynamite department," I reminds him, "and as such ain't got no personal interest in the fillin' department."

Mike's still lookin'.

"See that rock way down in that corner?" he asks me. "Gonna lift that out too?"

I looks at him very dignified.

"That ain't no rock," I says. "That's the corner of the Chinese Emperor's basement."

And all the time our company was standin' there waiting fer us to speak up and be sociable. So I lets out a how-de-do, and ain't the weather fine, and how's the spuds this year?

He starts out by sayin' he wasn't aiming to have no talk about crops and weather. They're already took care of, he says, and we don't have to bother our little heads about 'em. That's Providence, he says.

I gets at his meaning around by the back door, as you might say, after listenin' to him fer a while. What he's coming to is that he figgers we been real disrespectful to his barn, not to mention the mule and the hired man.

Then he asks us, just like he don't know, is this the right-of-way fer the Overland Railroad Company; and it is, I says. And are we clearin' the right-of-way under proper orders, he wants to know.

"We sure are," I says, "right down to the two extra sticks."

He don't understand right away, and I has to take some time to explain about the two extra sticks. He feels better then, and goes on jotting down a lotta things on some paper. Then he asks about the oak, and is it ours, he says.

Ours, I says, but we ain't got no more use fer it, so he can have it. He smiles and says that's reasonable.

"It ain't every man," I points out, "what can have a tree and a barn both growin' in the same place."

"No, it ain't every man," he agrees. "And it also ain't every railroad can have a clearin' crew like this either, is it?"

Well I ain't no blushin' violet exactly, but what can you say to a guy like that, so I stands right up and confesses that there ain't no other railroad in the whole world, maybe, what has a clearin' crew, all in all, like us. And ain't we done a thorough job, I wants to know.

"Very thorough," he says kinda quiet, and with that he goes.

After he has gone with his slip of paper and everything on it, I does some heavy thinkin'. He don't seem right, that feller. Something wrong with him. He took it too easy. A man don't just do that when he's got his barn busted.

Anyway I'm glad he likes our clearin'. I'm proud of it myself. It couldn't hardly be much cleaner without taking the whole township out. Of course there's some drawbacks, but what's that to us? Do yer duty, thinks I, and the Lord will pervide.

SO WE goes at it again. That last blast sure helped a lot. It took along a lot of trees and brush we'd otherwise had to cut or grub away. And that gives us an idea. From now on we blasts exclusive, except for a bush now and then that don't blow up. We're gettin' along swell.

And we ain't havin' no more trouble with any farmers, either. They're movin' out, abandonin' their farms as we nears. One day a gang of 'em come to argue with us, but they come from the wrong direction, and we didn't see 'em and sets off a blast. The committee was knocked clean cuckoo.

And we keeps on laborin'. Some days go by, and after a while we come to a rock which is like a kind of pet mountain right plunk in the middle of the right-of-way. That was on Saturday forenoon.

I points out to Mike that there ain't hardly no sense in buildin' a railroad there, because it'd be just as cheap to run a detour around it. But Mike won't hear of it. Orders is orders, he says, and we're follerin' 'em.

That's plenty. So we goes to work. All I ask is to be set down in front of something to do, and I'll guarantee that it'll be did.

We has to make a kind of flyin' judgment as to how many different holes it might take to boost it out of the way. And we had both decided it wasn't no use takin' chances on having to do it all over again, so we drills plenty. When we gets through, there's eight, altogether, with a half stick in each. That'd just about leave it slick an' clean, thinks I. But then I gets troublesome wonderin' where we're going to put them two extra sticks. I has 'em in my hand, and maybe I does look foolish a little.

"If we put these two extra sticks on one side," I says, "she'll get throwed off balance."

"Ain't gonna put 'em on one side," Mike says positive. "Gonna put 'em around on all sides."

"What you mean," I says reasonable enough, "is to split 'em up and sorta spread 'em around fair and square?"

"Spread 'em fair and square nothin'!" Mike snorts. "Now look here: doesn't the super say put in a sizable load?"

"He does," I agrees.

"Well," Mike goes on, "ain't a half a stick a sizable load?"

"In the case of said rock," I says, "a half stick in each place is a fair to middlin' load."

"Spread 'em out nothin'!" he snorts again. "We're follerin' orders, we are. Two extra fer each load, just like he says."

It takes about five minutes before I see that that's really what the super must've meant. But Jumpin' Jehosophat, thinks I, maybe there won't be a hot time in the old potato patch!

Anyway, what could I do? Use plenty, that's what he said; put in two extra sticks fer him. And if we don't foller orders, what good is it givin' 'em?

Besides, it was getting towards Saturday night, so there'd be Sunday for things to get sorta settled again in. And the little fat guy oughta be along any time now, accordin' to what Mike says.

Mike does most of the tampin'. I guess he likes his job fine. He don't say much to me, but he kind of hums and sings to himself, like he's real pleased.

Then we strings the wire and connects the batteries. We travels back a few miles. But I don't push the plunger. This time, thinks I, there ain't goin' to be no hitch. I'm still rememberin' them two farmers—the fightin' feller, and that quiet smiling guy. The first one wasn't so bad—I can handle a feller what speaks his mind. But that second one—he was figgerin' out some kind of a double cross. It ain't nacheral to smile that way.

So I calculates we'll see to it that there ain't nothing in the way. And we waits until we sees all the cows and other critters get fer home. Then we takes a long, careful look to see that there ain't no other animals snoopin' around—no dogs, or men, or nothing. We can't see none. Then I counts noses again. But before I gets through—in fact I never did get them all counted that time, and didn't have no chance later—before I gets through I sees something else.

I lets go the handle and looks real careful. It's coming the way we'd cleared, kinda hopping and jumping around like. It looks like a kind of grown-up flea except that it's got only two legs.

And a plug hat. I sees that next. Then I almost whoop fer happiness. It's the fat guy coming to see how we done our work. And is the right-of-way clean? It sure is!

But as he comes nearer, he's acting awful funny, not human as you might say, but kinda crazy, like he was all wound up and couldn't move except in jumps. He sure jump some—from crag to crag, as the poet says. Once in a while he stops, mebbe to get breath, then he shoves both hands way up towards the sky and shakes 'em. I look up. No rain coming, and I wonder what it's all about. Nice blue sky, thinks I, and what's the matter with the guy?

Crazy or no crazy, maybe I wasn't glad to see him! Here, thinks I, is where Jake Scroggins gets a rise in the world. Here's his reward fer faithful service. I was wonderin' how I would look in a plug hat.

But who's going to finish the dynamitin' and clearin', I wonders. I gets an idea. It's ideas that makes some men great, and lack of 'em that keeps others small.

"Mike," I says, "you're about to be promoted."

"How come?" he says, lookin' at the little fat guy.

"Your present foreman," I says, "is about due fer a change of occupation," I says, "and you'll prob'ly step into his shoes."

Mike don't seem to figger it out very good. And, anyway, I wasn't listening very close to what he says. I'm watchin' the super. He sure is carryin' on. He acts so funny I think he's got epilepticks or something. He hops, and then he pauses and looks around. Then he raises both hands to the sky and shakes 'em kind of fervent. Then he looks around some more, hops a couple steps, stops again, raises 'em and shakes 'em again. It's real inspirin' watching him.

"Wonder what's ailin' him?" I says.

"Looks like a new religion," Mike says. "I seen 'em do that in a movin' pitcher onct, only they was sun worshippers or something."

Then all of a sudden I remembers the big rock, and, thinks I, here I give 'em something a lot better'n a sun, millions of miles away. So I shove down fer all I'm worth.

That time we dropped the oak tree in the farmer's barn I thought was about the grandpa of all the loud bangs I'd ever heard. But that was only a sort o' faint and expirin' sigh compared to this one. Yessir, it wasn't even a husky whisper in comparison.

First I sees the whole earth start skywards up ahead of us. Looks like the whole country is settin' up on edge. And everything within, as you might say, sight and hearin' was partin' company, and may we meet on that beautiful shore, amen.

Well, the eclipse of the sun begins to put on the reverse English after a while. It starts to get light again. I turns around and faces the fat little guy with a pleased grin. That rock, thinks I, ain't goin' to be nowhere about when Gabriel toots his whistle fer the last reveille. It's going to be one of them missing-in-action things.

By that time he'd come close enough so we can see him plain and hear what he says. But his talk don't mean much. It's just sorta mumblin'. He's red-faced, too, and wild-lookin'. And his eyes is glassy.

I nudges Mike.

"If that's religion," I says, "he must be a Holy Roller, or a Heavenly Hopper, or something."

He's talkin' loud and promiscuous like when he gets close enough to address the gang.

"What in the name of the seven cockeyed and pinktoed idols of the Inner Shrine," he says, pointing kind of tragic at the death and destruction, "has been going on here?"

His voice shakes like he's got a fever or something. Well, thinks I, fever and religion is pretty much the same anyway.

I answers right up.

"Clearin' off all trees, stones, brush, stumps and et cetery," I says.

"Clearin'!" he wails. Then he pokes up his arms again. "My God!" he says weak like. He acts like he's got a stomach ache.

"Sure," I says cheerful. "Orders was to clear the right-of-way," I says. "And we begs to report that as far as we've gone there ain't nothing left but the et cetery," I says. "And we was just gettin' ready to move the rest of that."

He don't seem to get it into his head just right.

"Clearin'!" he howls. "This is gonna be a railroad, not a canal!" Then he gets smoothed off and calm all of a sudden. "I seem to remember," he says, "that you was offered a job by the Bolsheviks as chief dynamiter."

I didn't say nothing.

When he starts again, his voice is kinda shivering.

"Gawd help them or anybody else that turns you loose with dynamite," he says. "You'd have Russia and Siberia, and points east, wrapped around the North Pole inside of twenty-four hours," he says.

I see the guy is unreasonable, so I continues saying nothing.

He starts to fergit his dignity again.

"Do you know what you done?" he screams. "There's damage suits being filed that'll mor'gage the railroad fer a coupla centuries maybe. And if I hadn't come, there prob'ly wouldn't of been no land of the home, the free an' the brave left. Cows blown up, fences down, barns busted . . . Was you gonna start another war?" he says. "I see you got your no man's land ready."

"Don't worry," I says. "We'd have had to quit anyway, on account of bein' out of dynamite."

That pretty near knocks him out.

"Out of dynamite!" he yells sort of thin and cold. "Out of dynamite, you say?" he repeats. "Didn't you know that was gonna last fer the hull twenty-five miles? And you gone about four!"

"Mebbe it was gonna," I says, "but it didn't. How about orders?" I says. "Didn't you tell us to put in plenty?" I asks. "And when we'd put in good and plenty, didn't you tell us to put in two extra sticks fer you?"

He stands glaring and gulping. Mebbe he's choking, thinks I, and good thing too.

"You're fired!" he wheezes.

"Fired?" I says. That's gratitude fer you. Never trust a guy in a plug hat.

"You're *fired,*" he chokes. He don't seem able to get it out of his head.

Then he takes out a pencil and some paper.

"Transportation to where?"

"What?" I inquires, wondering what he's up to now.

"Where'd you sign on?" he asks sharp.

"Right here," I says.

"No, no, no," he moans. "I'm askin' you where you was hired."

"And I'm tellin' you I was hired by yourself right here," I comes back just as hard-boiled as he was.

"Well, sufferin' cadwallopers," he yells, "what point was you shipped out from?"

"Wasn't shipped out from nowhere," I says. I wonder does he take me fer a horse, or something? "I'm a free man," I says. "I just come along one day, and you hired me."

Well, the fat guy stares at me uncomprehendin' fer a minute, then he caves in like a snow man. After a while he comes to and hands me a time check.

He waves me away and mumbles something. I hears him givin' Mike orders to take charge of the work. Just as I'm leaving, Mike comes over and shakes hands and says good-by.

"No matter what that feller says," he says kinda low, "I myself, personal, think you're the smartest guy in the whole world. I'm still wondering how you could tell that I was going to be promoted, and you was going to have a change of occupation," he says and gives my hand a healthy squeeze. Good guy, Mike was.

I hears later that the railroad company has to build a narrow gauge road to fill up them holes, and that it took all the land on both sides of the right-of-way to do it.

But if it hadn't been fer them two extra sticks . . . Aw, well, I'd look like hell in a plug hat anyway.

More precious than rubies, and just about as rare, are tales of honest good humor like the above. Yet we found one for the September issue too, a happy yarn called "Left Foot First" by a writer you have met before, ELWOOD F. PIERCE.

A Two Part Story of Conflict for the Possession of a Rich and Far Flung Range

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The Bar R Ranch lies on the very edge of the Western desert, a survival of the stirring cattle days. When Dow Reiker, the pioneer owner, died he left the ranch to an Eastern boy, Dorwin Powell, son of an old sweetheart. The management of the ranch remained in the hands of Reed Howgan, the foreman.

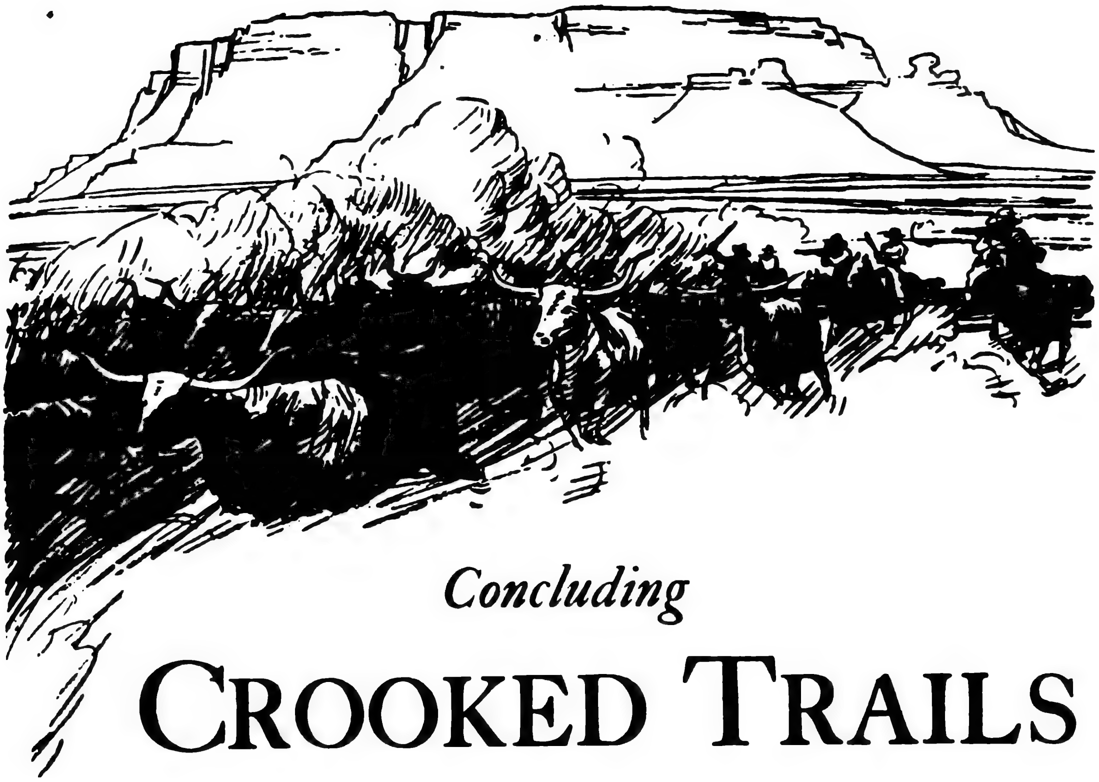
Reed Howgan was bitter. He thought the Bar R should be his. And after Reiker's death the returns he made to the new owner were very meager. For Reed schemed with the Bar R punchers to impoverish the ranch. Now Dorwin Powell, grown to manhood, is coming West to see his ranch. Reed plans a fitting reception. He will make life at the ranch so miserable for the Easterner that he will be glad to sell out for almost nothing and return East.

Allen Tingue, Reed's right hand man, meets Dorwin. Driving back from the station in a decrepit flivver, they are attacked by two horsemen wearing Mexican sombreros. Allen thinks to scare Dorwin by telling him that the pursuers are dangerous Mexicans from a rival ranch. Dorwin promptly whips out a high-powered rifle and shoots one of the riders. Allen is beside himself with fear and consternation, for the riders are two Bar R cowboys dressed up as Mexicans to give the greenhorn owner a preliminary scare. Allen didn't know that Dorwin was an expert shot, nor that he had faced bullets—in France.

Reed greets Dorwin with elation. This will be easy. No more than an Eastern parlor boy, easily scared, thinks Reed. Dorwin finds the Bar R depressing. Reed has seen to it that the place looks run down, the ranch-house dirty, the food unappetizing. Dorwin thinks himself poor, seeing only scrawny cattle. What Dorwin doesn't know is that Reed has secreted the best of the Bar R stock in Hidden Valley, holding them until the day when he shall be owner of the ranch.

Dorwin wants to ride. Reed gives him a vicious horse. But to the foreman's chagrin Dorwin mounts the brute safely and proves himself a skilful rider. On the edge of the desert a sand storm overtakes Dorwin. He loses his horse and wanders across the desert, lost. He has almost given up hope when he sees two horsemen in the distance. Dorwin is amazed when one of the riders turns out to be a young girl. She is Inez Vizcano of the *Rancho del Canotes*, the neighboring Spanish ranch. The young people are attracted to each other. And Dorwin finds it hard to believe that these mild, pleasant Spaniards are the bloodthirsty raiders Reed Howgan has depicted them. They find Dorwin's horse and he rides back towards the Bar R, determined now to stick it out.

Back at the Bar R Reed had welcomed the storm. Surely the Eastern greenhorn would die out there on the desert! His disappointment is keen when Dorwin returns safely. But Reed has still other plans for. getting rid of Dorwin, methods more deliberate and certain.



Concluding

CROOKED TRAILS

By DON CAMERON SHAFER

CHAPTER XIII

HOUSECLEANING

A DANGEROUS, smoldering rage gathered force in Reed Howgan's scheming brain. He had been lucky for so long, had his own way so much, that he could not stand it when chance and circumstance ran against him. A gambler who always raged at misfortune, who bullied and roared and plunged against ill luck, than which there is no more certain way to meet defeat. Reed raged against the inevitable, trying to curse away adversity. The very thought that he might lose this ranch, that he might be found out in his manipulating of the cattle, was quite sufficient to make him dangerous. He was like a trapped wolf—ready to fight anyone, anything, take any desperate chance if it promised freedom.

And now that his subtle schemes and plans were failing, one after another, miscarrying because of Dorwin's greater luck. And, too, because the cards were running against him, Reed became more and more desperate, too impatient to bide his hour. More bitter than wormwood, stinging to the very quick, was the fact that Dorwin, seeing that things were not going right, began to assert his authority, began to dominate and take the reins into his own hands. This from a boy, from a greenie, from a stranger—whether owner of the ranch or not—was more than Reed could bear.

Impossible for Dorwin, or anyone else accustomed to cleanliness and the simple comforts of life, to be content in that ranch-house. It was hot and desolate and lonesome. The rooms were dirty and swarmed with flies. The very air reeked with the smell of horses and cattle. The food was horrible—muddy coffee, soggy bread, endless beans.

"I am going to clean up this place," declared Dorwin the next morning.

"Just what do you mean?" Reed whirled about, startled, turning so his gun swung free to his hand. "Just what do you mean by that, young fellow?"

"I am going to clean up this house so it's fit for human beings to live in."

"Oh," said Reed, with evident relief.

"Fly to it. I used to feel that way myself."

Dorwin lugged water from the windmill; he scrubbed and cleaned; he darkened the rooms to drive out the man-eating flies; he swept and dusted and made the rooms orderly. He felt sorry for men who had degenerated and slipped back to the point where they could live like Indians, but, he argued, perhaps this was only natural. It was the frontier; they all practically lived outdoors; the work was heavy and dirty. He did not even imagine that Reed had planned and executed all this to make him dislike the place, to shorten his visit. When the rooms were clean he bearded the beardless cookie in the kitchen.

"Cookie," began Dorwin, facing the fat and sullen man, "you serve another meal like the last, in this place, and I'll skin you with your own paring knife."

"What's th' matter with them meals?" the cook yelled, angry because a youth was giving orders.

"Beans!" shouted Dorwin.

"Don't I cook 'em t' suit you?"

"You cook too damn many of them," grinned Dorwin. "Try your hand at something else for a change."

"Boss's orders," growled the man.

"I'm giving you the boss's orders," said Dorwin firmly. "While I am here I am the boss, and don't you forget it. You put some originality in the menu, beginning right now, or you and I will have a lot of trouble."

Dorwin encountered Reed in the living room.

"I've just threatened the cookie with his life," said he.

"You can kill him for all I care," growled Reed.

"There isn't any reason why he should serve the horrible grub he does."

"He does the best he can."

"Then we'll get another cook."

"Where?" asked Reed.

"I don't know where, but I do know that if I start out after another cook I'll get one."

Reed glared at him, hate in his eyes.

"Oh," sneered he, "I suppose you'd run right down to the employment agency and pick one out!"

"There is no reason why we should live like a lot of savages," continued Dorwin.

"I try to run this place as careful and economical as possible," argued Reed, taking defense in a lie.

"If it won't pay enough to feed us decently then we better abandon it."

Reed's anger died down. This was the very mood he was hoping for. Wait—he'd make this lad so sick of the place he'd be glad to give it away!

"It's a hard life," he began, watching Dorwin closely.

"That doesn't excuse dirt, filthy grub and surrounding the only home we've got with orphan calves and starving cows. Nor is there reason to park horses in the dooryard."

"One gets a bit careless with so much to do."

"I'm going to clean house with the whole business—" began Dorwin.

"If you think you can run this ranch better than I can——"

"I know I can run the house and dooryard better," answered Dorwin, "even if I don't know a thing about the cattle business."

"Probably," sneered Reed, "you've had more experience with women's work!"

Dorwin, feeling sorry for the man, overlooked this, and hurried outside. Step-and-a-Half was driving up a bunch of horses. Dorwin ordered him to take the riding horses away from the hitchrail before the door and move the rack to some place farther away.

"Walk way over there when you want a hoss?" questioned the lazy fellow.

"Yes, and we're going to clean up this dooryard, move this stock, get rid of these calves—everything!"

Step-and-a-Half rebelled when Dorwin asked him to help clean the dooryard, but Allen, happening along, sided with Dorwin just to torment Step-and-a-Half. Rebellious but weak, the puncher was soon busy with a withe broom.

"Where you goin' t' make them posy beds?" called Steve as he rode in.

"When you get your lawn done," grinned Charley, "I'll buy you a nice croquet set."

Dorwin had sense enough to know that, while they all pretended to be kidding the puncher, they were in reality aiming these verbal shafts at himself. So far he had found no friendship among the hands, but this he attributed to the fact that he was younger, an Easterner, and only better acquaintance would win them over. He knew that he must overlook a great deal and, at times, deafen his ears to laughter and sneering remarks.

Had Dorwin been confined to the ranch-house and immediate vicinity he could not have endured it a week. But he rode out somewhere every day. But for the memory of the girl who had rescued him from the desert, the knowledge that she rode the far trails, that she lived somewhere over there behind the blue mountains to the south, he would have gone away soon enough to suit even the impatient Reed and never been the wiser about what was going on with his own property.

But, every day he rode out, always in the general direction of the deep cleft in the southern range. Warned by his last experience he now carried his favorite rifle in a saddle holster under his left leg and he traveled as vigilantly and carefully as any hunter of big game.

"You fellows keep an eye on him," ordered Reed. "So long as he don't ride toward Hidden Valley there ain't no need to take chances."

"We're watchin' him," answered Allen with easy assurance.

"If he starts that way turn him back at any risk."

"You bet we will," promised Allen. "He'd sure get an eyeful in jest one peek over inter that place."

"He thinks the stock died of the drought. I told him there was no pasture and no water."

"That's right," grinned Allen. "Amuse th' child with fairy tales."

"What else could I tell him?"

"Why," grinned Allen, "you could have said they'd been stolen."

"Are you throwin' the harpoon into me?" demanded Reed.

"Just one o' my little jokes," laughed Allen.

"I don't like your jokes," growled Reed, a fist upon his gun. "Those cattle are mine, every last head of them—all mine! I raised them, didn't I? I watched over them, I grew every pound of that beef, and no Eastern dude in knee pants is coming out here and take it away from me!"

"I should say not," agreed Allen.

"We've got to scare him out," said Reed hoarsely, "or carry him out!"

SO IT happened that Allen Tingue, riding home from Hidden Valley, where he had been adding to the big herd pastured there, took one last careful survey of the landscape before he came out of the well hidden trail. Dismounting, he crept to the rocky rim and peered out. Sure enough, to his right, on another trail, he saw Dorwin alone, riding slowly along.

With a grin and a chuckle Allen slipped back out of sight and hurried to his horse.

"Was ever a thousand dollars earned so easily?" he thought.

He quirted his horse down the trail to head off Dorwin, who was out of sight on a lower level and approaching at an angle. Near the place where the two trails crossed Allen swung off, his horse safely out of sight, grabbed his carbine from its boot and crawled rapidly to the vantage point of a rock pile close to Dorwin's trail. From the security of an intervening rock Allen leveled the rifle, ready and waiting. His little eyes grew hard and cold.

A tinkle of small stones rattling, the shuffle and pound of a fast walking horse's feet, then Dorwin rode up straight into the notch of the rear sight, straight before the knife edge of the bead. Allen's grimy forefinger was on the trigger.

"Gosh!" Allen's breath caught in his throat; sweat burst out all over him; he felt his body tingling. "Gosh—I can't do it!"

There was no murder in Allen's good-natured heart, a man of loud laughter and rough jokes, he was not a killer. He pulled himself hurriedly back, as from temptation, trembling all over, and ran to his horse as from some monstrous thing. Just after he swung into his saddle and faced about, Dorwin rode around the bend and saw him.

"Hello," he greeted.

"Hello," grinned Allen. "You're traveling a long ways from home, ain't you?"

"It doesn't seem far."

"Long enough in this direction."

"Just what do you mean by that?" demanded Dorwin.

"This isn't exactly what I would call a healthy trail," laughed Allen significantly.

"Why not?"

"It's th' main highway, as you might say, to th' Injun country."

"Indian country?"

“The Navajo reservation.”

“Are you trying to frighten me?”

“Oh, no,” chuckled Allen, “nothin's goin' t' scare you . . . But I've had some right bad scares on this trail myself . . .I thought you ought t' be warned.”

“They are all tame Indians.”

“Not these northern Navajo.”

“I never heard of their making any trouble.”

“A lot o' things happen out here,” chuckled Allen, “you fellers never hear of back East.”

“I suppose so.”

“So take my advice an' don't ride this trail no further—t'ain't nowise healthy.”

“All right,” agreed Dorwin hastily. “It doesn't make any difference where I ride.”

“It looks all th' same out here anyway, wherever you go,” agreed Allen.

Dorwin, looking down at the ground, saw the trail cut and trampled by the hoofs of many cattle.

“It doesn't look like a cattle country,” said he.

“It t'ain't,” said Allen. “It's work jest t' drive a bunch o' cows through here!”

“I suppose you've had a hard day?”

“You bet I have,” Allen responded, glad of sympathy from the big boss. “I've been wrestling with a bunch o' strays. Tryin' t' make 'em go where they didn't want t' go.”

“Go where?”

“Oh,” gulped Allen, “gettin' 'em further up in th' hills where there's some pasture left.”

“I thought perhaps I might run on some game up this way.”

“What kind o' game?” asked Allen suspiciously.

“Oh, a sheep or deer.”

“Ho,” chuckled Allen, relieved. “You got t' git higher up fer sheep.”

“I'm going up a ways.”

“Oh, all right.” Allen considered this and finally decided that Dorwin was innocent and harmless enough. “Amuse yourself, but don't get lost.”

From behind a mass of tumbled rock Dorwin watched Allen riding homeward. Long after he was out of sight Dorwin rode back to the cattle marked trail and galloped up it, mile after mile. It climbed steadily into the broken foothills, detouring around deep cañons, along wide benches, skirting the flank of barren, rocky hills. From the top of a high ridge Dorwin looked ahead and saw a wide, rock walled cañon where a large drove of cattle was being driven along by two men. Even at that distance he recognized the riders as Injun John and Corn Willet of his own ranch.

“Evidently this drought hasn't killed all the stock,” thought Dorwin, puzzled. “I wonder who they belong to? They can't be mine or Reed would have told me . . . Some other cattleman . . . Perhaps the *Rancho del Canotes.*”

CHAPTER XIV

A VERY BAD SHOT

“OH, LISTEN, grandfather—” began the Señorita Inez Vizcano breathlessly, as she dashed up the steps to the shadowy portico. “I have just had such a great adventure!”

“Me alegro mucho!”

The old cavalier was reclining comfortably in a large red plush chair, deep in the cool shade, amid potted palms and bright flowers, a singing bird in a gilt cage.

“I found a man lost in the desert!”

“I am glad for his sake,” said the old man. “It is terrible to be lost in the Hot Sands country.”

“And who do you suppose it was?”

“Probably a stray hunter from some northern ranch,” he guessed.

“No.”

“A prospector——”

“No,” she burst in, eager to tell him. “It was the owner of the American ranch to the north!”

“So!” The old man sucked his breath in astonishment. “A boy lost——”

“You forget, dear grandfather,” she laughed, “this boy is by now well grown.”

“I suppose that is true,” he sighed. “The years have a way of flying.”

“A strong and handsome youth. So brave, so whimsical——”

“You make a romance out of your adventure,” he laughed.

“Oh, you would like him, too.”

“Very probably,” he agreed, with an indulgent and understanding smile. “All *Americanos* are not bad men. Whatever those questionable characters up at the

Bar R may do, I remember well that there are many good *Americanos* in this great country. Well do I recall Señor Dow Reiker . . . What a friend and neighbor!"

She must go over every detail of her adventure, describing the young man, the storm, repeating as much of the conversation as she could remember.

"So he is come of age," thoughtfully from the old man, "and has come to look at his property? Did he appear like a man of sense and good business, who might take an interest in his ranch and this Western country?"

"His hair was wavy and black as night——"

"Dear me!" cried the grandfather. "Isn't it wonderful to be young!"

"I was but telling you how he looked!"

"And I was asking about his good sense and judgment. But, remember, my little one, not to ride that way just because there is a new young man there."

"I wouldn't think of such a thing!"

"I do not trust those men of his."

"But this Señor Powell—he is so different!"

"Unless he has sense enough to clean up that bunch of outlaws and rustlers you may be sure he is off the same piece of goods."

"I don't believe he knows."

"If his head, with all its beautiful wavy black hair," said the grandfather, smiling, "is put on right side up he will soon discover a few things for himself."

At which, red and flustered, she ran away and left him.

THINGS were going a bit smoother now at the Bar R. For one thing, the meals were better and both Allen and Reed were glad, by this time, to get back to appetizing rations. Dorwin saw to it that the ranch-house was kept clean and orderly, properly shaded from the heat of midday and well aired during the cool hours of night. Both Reed and Allen pretended to be friendly. But several little things of a suspicious nature were slowly gathering shape in Dorwin's mind—little and insignificant things in themselves, perhaps, but combining as a whole to make him think.

"I met a couple of our Spanish neighbors the other day," he began casually at dinner.

"Oh," said Reed, his eyes growing very bright. "You did?"

"Uh-huh, and they didn't eat me alive either."

"Took a few shots at you," grinned Allen.

"Not that time," smiled Dorwin. "My greatest danger was from an arrow in the old heart."

"Talk sense," demanded Reed.

"One of them," sighed Dorwin, "was a very beautiful young woman."

"Any woman'll look beautiful to you after you've been out here a while, even a swarthy faced, hairy lipped——"

"This," interrupted Dorwin, "was a striking blonde, all red and gold——"

"You must have been asleep an' dreamed all that!"

"Seems like a dream," he admitted. "But I guess you aren't very well acquainted with your neighbors on the south."

"Enough to know that they are dangerous!" said Reed.

Dorwin laughed. He didn't believe all this, and yet he could understand how men might hug such delusions and really believe them to be true. The very fact that the two races had avoided each other proved that both might be mistaken.

"And while I was riding over that way since—" continued Dorwin, watching Reed's face.

"I thought I told you not to ride there!" interrupted Reed.

"You did," smiled Dorwin, "and maybe that was the very reason why I went!"

Reed's face darkened but he made no reply to this.

"And maybe I only wanted to see whether that girl was just a dream after all."

"I'm not trying to tell you where you can ride," said Reed a bit angrily. "You can ride where you damn well please, but remember you take your own chances."

"I'm used to taking chances, Reed!"

"You may take one too many someday."

"While I was riding over that way," Dorwin began again, still studying the man before him, "I happened to look down in a big, wide cañon——"

"Ah!" said Reed in surprise.

"And there I saw a large bunch of fine cattle."

"Oh, you did!" sneered Reed. "You ride out in a cattle country and act surprised when you find a bunch of stock. Well, my little man, I'll tell you a secret: There's cattle in them hills!"

He laughed loud and long, as though it were a great joke, but there was no mirth in all this laughter.

"I was just wondering who owned that stock?" added Dorwin.

"Why didn't you look at the brands?" sneered Reed.

"I didn't think of it," confessed Dorwin, "and, besides, I was too far away."

"Well," said Reed relieved, "I can tell you who they belonged to." He breathed a bit easier. "That bunch of stock very probably belonged to old Andrado Vizcano, the grandfather of that very beautiful señorita you say you met the other day."

"Evidently they are more fortunate than we are," said Dorwin. "Their cattle have not died in this drought."

"They're lucky enough to own all the best waterholes," argued Reed. "The Spanish got here first. If you own the water you can get your stock through, and if you don't you've got to take chances."

"Oh," said Dorwin, as though convinced.

Reed stood around a little while, not daring to ask questions, and yet a bit puzzled to know just how much Dorwin had seen and how much he really suspected. Then, getting no hint, he went outdoors and sent Allen with hurried instructions to have the boys move the stock in Hidden Valley to another sanctuary he knew.

DORWIN POWELL was not the one to sit patiently brooding over suspicions. He meant to ride out and investigate things for himself. Neither was he the youth to wait patiently for dreams to come true. Whenever he rode he managed, somehow, sooner or later, to ride to Rock Spring, hoping to meet the girl there again. Now, on this cool morning, with a fine breeze blowing down out of the north, he rode straight toward the cleft of mountains, determined to wait no longer.

He meant to go and find her.

Youth, with a girl at the end of the trail, rides with sharp spurs. Dorwin made what speed he could. Where the way was easy he urged the good horse forward, favoring the animal when the trail was rough and steep. Climbing up the rough face of a low plateau he found before him a long, level stretch and spurred his horse into a run. At the first leap a whining rifle bullet passed close behind him—just where he would have been but for the fortunate touch of the spurs.

"Again!" he cried.

The sorrel wheeled to his startled jerk on the reins. To ride on was to invite another bullet from this unseen assassin. A scheme flashed through his head. He jerked the horse back, slid sidewise to the ground and then quickly writhed and wriggled over the rim of the low mesa in a very good imitation of a man mortally shot.

"It's high time I found out who is shooting at me," he told himself as soon as he was out of sight. "He's hiding in the rocks up there somewhere."

Behind this bank Dorwin was safe enough for the time being. But he did not look for a place to hide. Instead, safely out of sight, he leaped to his feet and ran along the base of the cliff like a coursing staghound trying to cut off a running buck. If he had done a good job of acting, the man who had shot at him soon would be climbing down.

Stooping he ran. Once he even crawled along. He planned to hide in a little dry coulée just ahead. He must be close; it must be a complete surprise or his plan failed, might even end with another shot and death if discovered. Whisking around a big rock to the safety of the coulée he ran up this to where it turned sharply to the right. There before him was a dust covered horse waiting for its rider. This was even better than he planned, thought Dorwin, as he dropped behind a rock, his automatic ready.

"I'll know all about this in a few minutes," he promised himself, "or do some shooting myself!"

He didn't have long to wait. Very soon he heard some stones rattling down from the height, then the crunch of boots. He saw a pair of legs descending and leaped out.

"Halt, right where you are!"

Instead, a badly startled man came

sliding down the remaining distance in a cloud of dirt; a badly frightened face flashed suddenly toward him—it was Corn Willet!

"So it was you shooting at me!"

"Honest t' God," mumbled Willet, his sallow face now a yellowish white, "I thought it was one o' them greasers!"

"Oh," said Dorwin, "so you really do think after all."

"I thought it was one o' them greasers," stammered the cowboy, terrified, seeking safety in lies, anything, groping for some plausible explanation.

"You better find out who you are taking pot shots at in the future!"

"Honest t' God——"

"A dirty coward, hiding in the rocks——"

"They'd do th' same t' me!"

"Who would?" demanded Dorwin.

"Them Spaniards."

"You don't know what you are talking about. I don't believe a word of that stuff. And, let me tell you, even if there has been trouble, that war is over now."

"Sure, if you say so," Willet agreed, servile, grinning, willing to pay any price for his life.

"No more shooting at anyone, you hear me!"

"Yes, yes——"

"Anyway," said Dorwin in disgust, "you're a rotten shot!"

"Ain't I?"

"I ought to shoot a few holes in you myself, right now, so you could get a good idea what you were planning for someone else."

"Deserve it, too," agreed Willet.

Dorwin, in disgust, not knowing how much truth there was in this, broke the fellow's rifle over a convenient rock and threw away the pieces.

"Get out of my sight!" he ordered. "You spoil the air."

He watched the man run to his waiting horse and swing into the saddle, spurring away as though fully expecting a shot in the back.

"I wonder," Dorwin asked himself, "if that cur really was trying to get me, or just giving me a song and dance? Sometimes I think they are really dangerous and, then again, I suspect that they are only trying to scare me away from this country."

CHAPTER XV

DESERT HOSPITALITY

ON ALONG a well marked trail Dorwin rode, straight through the cleft in the mountain wall, a narrow pass riven from the solid rock, which brought him among low, descending hills sparsely covered with gray-green desert brush and faded coarse grass clinging tenaciously to the shifting sand. A winding trail swinging slowly down between the hills.

So at last, like *Prince Charming*, came he to the enchanted valley!

This was the *Rancho del Canotes;* this was the oasis in the desert. By contrast to his own desolate and bleak ranch this was a garden. Trees, a sizable forest of them, rustled pleasantly in the wind, a gleam of silver water, a touch of emerald grass. And, on a small knoll, almost hidden by shrubbery, the red tiles and creamy walls of a Spanish house. Dorwin reined in, sitting there in abject surprise, in frank admiration, staring as though all this was another mirage.

"Beautiful!" was all he could say.

It might possibly be imagination, he had been so long denied those things, but he was sure he could detect the fragrance of flowers in the air blowing into his face, could feel the damp tang of water so near in a small lake.

"They may be Spanish," said he, "but they know how to live!"

A glance revealed that credit for this was not all due to nature; the hand of man had been busy here. A natural oasis, a natural green and wet spot in the dry land, had been taken over and made a garden by those who loved nature and studied beauty.

"They may be enemies," said he, "but they've got good taste."

In that moment he felt ashamed of his own place, ashamed of his own men, Reed and Allen and the rest, thinking only of work and money, living like barbarians.

"There's something wrong with that ranch of mine," he told himself, "and it isn't altogether the lack of a suitable appreciation of beauty and how to live, either!"

A bit nervous and excited he rode

slowly on again, wondering if Inez would be there, if she would be glad to see him, if he would be treated as an enemy and a trespasser. He was a bit fearful of his own reception. But, regardless, no matter what might happen, he went on, determined to see the venture through.

It was Jorge, resting in the deep shade of a rock, smoking endless cornhusk cigarets while watching over a flock of Angoras, who saw him first. Jorge did not reach for a gun, nor run away shouting a warning, as Dorwin half expected. Instead he leaped up and snatched off his big hat in a sweeping gesture:

"Servidor de Usted!"

"Hello, George," smiled Dorwin. "Let's you and I have a nice little visit!"

Inasmuch as neither could understand a word of the other's speech, this pleasantry was lost on the Mexican.

Jorge was old and experienced in the ways of the world and young people. He didn't need to be told why Dorwin had come or whom he wanted most to see. He beckoned for Dorwin to follow and hurried away down the trail as fast as his shuffling, sandaled feet could carry him, up the shady walk to the house, shouting in Spanish:

"Your man has come!"

"Hush!" said the girl and leaped up as she saw Dorwin riding into the dooryard.

"Your man—" began Jorge.

"Away with you!" she told him, pretending to be severe, and glad that Dorwin could not understand. "Back to your goats!"

"Hello," cried Dorwin, his heart pounding. "I've come to negotiate for peace."

"There is never anything but peace here." The old cavalier was speaking from the open doorway. *"Tendre el gusto de abrazalre."*

"I am your friend and neighbor, Dorwin Powell, of the Bar R Ranch."

"Welcome, young man, welcome to this place, Señor Powell."

He clapped his hands in the Moorish fashion and when a white clad servant came running bade him take the horse.

"Come and sit with us, señor."

Dorwin came slowly up the wide steps, bordered with flowers in Indian pottery, and the girl came forward, a bit timorously, yet glad to see him, and took his hands.

"My grandfather," said she. "Don Andrado y Enrique de Vizcano."

"I always have thought of you as a child," said the old gentleman. "Now I am glad to take the hand of a man."

A mahogany chair was placed at his convenience. A white dressed Mexican girl slipped in and out and left at his elbow a silvery tray with a cooling drink, cigarets in a chased gold case and a card of matches.

"This," sighed Dorwin, "is like living again!"

"It is the Spanish way," smiled Señor Andrado. "Even in the wilderness we *haciendadoes* try to live."

"It is my intention to be neighborly," began Dorwin.

"That will be fine and glorious for us both," said the señor. "We have so few neighbors."

"And avoid all friction and trouble between our men."

"There has been no trouble," said Señor Andrado. "We never go beyond the mountain barrier."

"There has been some little difficulty—" began Dorwin.

"Not from our people," assured Don Andrado.

"I admit that my men are probably to blame."

"For what?" questioned Inez.

"Making it unpleasant for you or any of your help, on the other side of the mountains."

"Oh," said she, "we never go there any more."

"I mean to make it so you can."

"That will be nice."

"And I want to be certain that your men will not bother us."

"Why, they never have!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Well," said Dorwin. "I guess then my men have been unable to resist the great temptation of "riding" an Eastern greenhorn!"

Dorwin, puzzled at this denial, did not go into details. He could see that it was a subject which these courteous people wanted to avoid. But, if they spoke the truth, then Corn Willet's shooting at him was either a deliberate attempt at murder, which could not be explained, or the man was trying to frighten him, playing a rough country joke on an Eastern stranger.

"Well," he smiled, "I do not intend to be a greenhorn always. I am learning a lot of things—fast!"

"It is difficult," said Inez, "to tell some of these rough jokes from the real thing."

Courtesy forbade her to say more.

"It's all so beautiful and wonderful here," exclaimed Dorwin, changing the subject. "I wonder how you did it?"

"Once it was beautiful at Dow Reiker's home," said the grandfather.

"A desert now," Dorwin added mournfully.

"Those men, they care only for money . . . It is not as though the owner lived there himself . . . They have no personal interest."

"Nor could I afford to make it the garden you have here," Dorwin finished the thought in his mind.

"You cannot afford not to," corrected Vizcano, "if you expect to live there."

"I've got to live there," smiled Dorwin bravely.

"In a few years, perhaps, when you have made a great success of the cattle industry——"

"Much longer than that!" laughed Dorwin. "I am afraid there isn't much of a fortune in the cattle business."

"Surely, with so many fine cattle——"

"I haven't so many and they aren't so fine."

"Oh, surely——"

"Not to be compared with those fine herds of steers belonging to you that I saw in that mountain pasture to the northwest."

"You are mistaken," corrected the señor. "We have no steers up that way."

"But I saw several hundred!"

"Not with our brand."

"I couldn't see the brand."

"Maybe it was your own brand," suggested Inez.

"No," said Dorwin, "Reed guessed they might belong to you."

"It might be a good idea," said the señor, "for you to ride over there again and look at the brand."

"There are other cattlemen to the north of us."

"Of course, but——"

But the girl interrupted him with a soft Spanish word and the subject was dropped. Dorwin wondered what they were keeping from him.

"We are honored that you came," said Don Andrado. "And now I will arrange for a good dinner to reward you."

"No," protested Dorwin, "I cannot stay."

"Please." Her hand was on his sleeve.

Silver and old red mahogany, a darkened room with the hot sun shut out, yellow candles shedding their soft radiance over the table. Opposite him the old don in his blue velvet coat, beside him the girl in white. Dorwin thought of his own recent meals, the bare pine table, the rough men and their noisy eating! With very little time for extra preparation this was a wonderful dinner; but Dorwin never could remember what he ate. He very soon discovered that these people not only lived well on their ranch but they were well acquainted with life outside. Their conversation disclosed that they frequently took long vacations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans, Chicago, even to Mexico City.

"Our family has lived here a long time," the girl was saying. "All our people have tried to make it comfortable and beautiful, as a home should be. What you see is the product of generations."

"The Spanish love for beauty," said he.

"We are Spanish more in our way of living than anything else," she laughed. "We, too, are Americans."

"Of course!"

"Our men," laughed Don Andrado, "always have had a way of bringing home Yankee girls."

Back on the porch again, Don Andrado dosed off for forty winks. Without disturbing him Dorwin and Señorita Inez walked off down the maze of paths under the trees. Birds sang above them, brilliant and exotic pheasants walked over the grass, once a green peacock strutted proudly across before them. All this was beautiful and yet, Dorwin thought, not as beautiful as the girl so close to his side, smiling up at him in an animated description of her home.

"Every Vizcano had added something," said she, "and I, being the last one, have done my share. Come, I will show you!"

Eager as a child, she was, to exhibit her contribution to this beauty spot: A stone summer house with a red tile roof, balanced atop a great rock above the little lake.

"There is always a breeze here," said she. "It is always beautiful."

"You have done well," he complimented her. "Beauty—art—love."

"I do love this place . . . It is my home."

IT WAS night before he left, as though unseen hands had dragged up between earth and sun an old black velvet curtain, worn and pierced with innumerable holes.

"I do not like to have you ride away in the night," she told him.

"I do not like to ride away at all," he laughed boldly.

"I fear for you."

"Because of the dark?" he asked.

"No—no," she answered slowly. "I know that you are safer because it is dark!"

"Why are you afraid?" he demanded.

"Because, because—" she hesitated, "all is not as it should be on the Bar R!"

"I have suspected as much for days."

"You must not go back there."

"I shall go back."

"Why?"

"Because it is mine. It is my ranch, my home, and this is my fight."

"One against so many," she murmured, anxiety creeping into her voice.

"I am going back," he said then, in a low, determined voice, "and clean up the whole place!"

"*Quiera Dios!*" It was half a whisper. She touched his hand and was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

A SHOOTING MATCH

"WE CAN'T come right out in the open and shoot him," commented Allen.

"I could," cursed Reed, "with the greatest pleasure and satisfaction!"

"You'll never get a chance——"

"I make chances," cut in Reed.

They stood in the worn and trampled dooryard before the ranch-house watching Dorwin Powell riding in with the early morning sun.

"I figger thet bird's got a charmed life," said Allen.

"The boys always manage, somehow, to bungle things up every time!"

"That's his good luck."

"Look at him," snorted Reed. "Actually happy out here in this Godforsaken country!"

"An' singin'!" added Allen.

"I'll change his tune before I'm done with him!"

"I guess I'd better copper that bet," said Allen. "We sure ain't goin' t' break his heart with lonesomeness."

The disappointed Reed answered with a throaty and unintelligible growl, a warning dire and threatening, as the rumble of any bear, as Dorwin rode up singing.

"There was a crooked man
Who walked a crooked mile,
And found a crooked sixpence
Against a crooked stile."

"Why all this vocal distress?" greeted Reed in no friendly voice.

"Joyous song declaring a happy heart," smiled Dorwin.

Reed did not even suspect that the source of Dorwin's new found happiness was over at the *Rancho del Canotes.*

"I don't particularly like the words to your song," snarled Reed, dangerous and threatening.

The very attitude of the man, wide legged, muscles tense, face drawn, startled even the hard Allen who lacked both the hate and the courage to shoot down an unarmed and unwarned tenderfoot, even though he might rob him with a laugh.

"It's an old song," Dorwin said, watching him, "written to amuse children."

"Well I'm grown up an' it don't amuse me scarcely any!"

"What don't you like about my song?" asked Dorwin, still smiling, though with an effort.

"I don't like the emphasis you put on that word 'crooked,'" came like the crack of a whip.

"Well," smiled Dorwin, "I wasn't exactly intending to give offense. That song was prompted by reason of my finding a crooked silver coin in a crooked trail——"

"You don't mean to imply that I'm a crook?"

"Not now," Dorwin answered, with a

hard, unaccustomed ring to the words. He tossed to Reed's booted feet a battered and twisted ten-cent piece.

"Huh," grunted Reed. "That's only the dime I shot offen a rock the other day t' show the boys what six-gun shootin' really was."

"I take it then," said Dorwin, faint traces of a smile still visible, "that you are good with your old firelock."

"And willing to demonstrate it any time or place!" snapped Reed.

"Show me how good you are." A challenge rang in Dorwin's voice.

The seconds dragged slowly by—Allen standing there, mouth open, expecting to be deafened by Reed's heavy gun; Reed taut and set to spring, glaring at the smiling youth before him. He glared and raged inwardly, and yet did not know whether this tenderfoot had meant the sentence for a challenge or a trial at marksmanship.

"What—what do you mean?" muttered the foreman hoarsely.

Reed backed down, staying his eager hand although his fingers were itching for the butt of his ready gun. There was something about Dorwin's dark eyes, something false about all his seeming innocence, some subtle psychological warning he could not interpret and yet sufficient to make him bide his hour. . . .

"Allen, set up a rock," spoke Dorwin, "and let Reed show us how good he is."

Allen, anxious to break this spell of death, this terror hovering between these two men, leaped to obey, ready with his capers and his laughter. He set up a rock, the size of a man's head, on a cut bank a bit above waist high. Dorwin dismounted and stood beside Reed, watching him. That the man was fast with his gun there could be no doubt. It was evident in the tigerish quickness of him, the skill of long practice. And now he fully meant to convince Dorwin that he was his master.

"Ready—when I give th' word," announced Allen behind them. "Now!"

Reed's hand flashed down, but before his own gun was more than free of the holster, the rock was battered down by a stream of flying missiles, rolling in one long staccato of sound. Reed's face went deadly white, his hand was weak as water, his gun slid back into place. Now he knew that he had just missed a very close call with death.

"Not quite good enough," smiled Dorwin.

Reed stared at him wide eyed. No gun was visible in Dorwin's hand. All he saw was that the cloth had been torn and frayed a bit at the edge of his gray coat. Reed's jaws worked, but no words came.

"That old fusee of yours," smiled Dorwin, "is sadly out of date. A man with a modern automatic could shoot you full of holes before you could get that cannon unlimbered."

Reed Howgan turned and walked into the house, his shoulders sagging, his pride humbled and his nerves shaken.

"I'll find a way to get you!" he mumbled over and over to himself. "I'll find a way to get you!"

Dorwin, staring after Reed, spoke to the dumbfounded Allen.

"A man doesn't have to be born out here, Allen, to learn how to shoot."

"Evidently not," agreed Allen.

"There are quite as good marksmen back East, even in the big cities," smiled Dorwin, "and some of them are just as quick and handy with their guns."

"Some o' 'em are quicker!" grinned Allen.

"I have had a lot of experience with firearms, Allen."

"I'll bet you have," agreed Allen enthusiastically.

"I have hunted all my life, small game and big game, and I have had some experience shooting at the biggest game of all—over there in France!"

"You don't look like you'd ever killed anything bigger'n a gopher!"

"You can't tell much by looks, Allen. You wouldn't think it, but this little auto gun, which I carry right handy in my pocket here, does it all by her little self. One touch of the safety and away she goes—the whole works!"

"I'll say she does!"

"Make a regular skimmer of a man, wouldn't it, Allen?"

"Not of me!" grinned Allen. "I'm meek as a lamb, I be!"

With this brief explanation Dorwin walked into the ranch-house and confronted Reed.

"I have just spent a very pleasant day over at the *Rancho del Cantoes*," he began.

"Well, suppose you have," snarled Reed. "What do I care where you spend the day?"

"I don't suppose it makes any difference to you."

"Not the slightest."

"I thought you might be interested to know that they didn't eat me!"

"I can see that," replied Reed boldly. "Much as I regret it."

"From now on," added Dorwin, "bugaboo nursery tales about Mexican raiders will cease to amuse me."

"I guess the boys were just having a little fun with you——"

"Laugh heartily. But let me tell you, Mr. Corn Willet's little joke yesterday came near being his last."

"How—what?" Reed pretended not to know.

"He took a shot at me!"

"No?" said Reed in mock surprise.

"It came near being his last. Except that, unlike some people I know, I have no stomach for shooting a man down in cold blood, Corn would not be on top today."

"If he did anything as foolish as that he'd deserve all he got."

"Maybe he was trying to scare me—and maybe he was trying to get me."

"Why should he want to get you?"

"I am sure I don't know. He claims he thought I was one of the riders from the Spanish ranch. I guess his eyesight is getting poor. Certainly he missed me."

"It ain't his eyes," snorted Reed, "it's his head!"

"I want you all to know," added Dorwin, "that the aforementioned incident will be the last time anyone who misses me can get away with the excuse that he took me for a Mexican sheepherder!"

CHAPTER XVII

SOMETIME RUSTLERS

REED HOWGAN, to use a familiar gambler's term, comforted himself with the knowledge that he still had an ace in the hole.

"If you don't want to ranch it—" he began when Dorwin came in.

"I do," corrected Dorwin.

"I thought, perhaps, if you wanted to sell out——"

"I don't," Dorwin answered emphatically.

"All right," said Reed, "I guess then we better part company."

"That," said Dorwin, "would be better for us both."

"Then I ask for my time the first of the month." Reed was far more desperate and dangerous now than Dorwin even suspected. "That will give me time to look around for another job."

This in itself would have warned a more experienced Western rancher, this reluctance of Reed's to go immediately, this excuse of looking for another place. But how was Dorwin to know? Such things are quite the accepted order in the East, though, in the West, an employee thus assured that he wasn't wanted would have quit on the spot.

Reed's ace in the hole was the large bunch of steers hidden away in the mountains. He meant to get them out if he could. While they grazed up there in the mountain pasture it could not be said that Reed had taken them. Any time he should be confronted with this accusation he had but to say that he had ordered them driven up there to be near water and feed. Dorwin did not know how many cattle there were on the ranch. Given a few days' time, Reed could work them out over the Navajo country by a trail he knew, and Dorwin never be any the wiser. A gambler's chance—and yet, with so much at stake, he meant to try it.

Had Reed been certain that Dorwin had no accurate count, no certain knowledge of just how many Bar R steers were in the hills, all would have been easy enough. Then he could jump the job and ride away, to come back later with the boys by a different route and work the cattle out over the secret trails. But, if Dorwin really knew about the stock, as his pointed questions led Reed to suspect, then some other way, some explanation for their sudden disappearance had to be devised.

"I'm through here," Reed announced in the bunkhouse that night.

"I guess we're all through," said Corn Willet.

"But I ain't through with that young squirt yet," fumed Reed.

"What we goin' t' do with all them cows we got hid out up yonder?" asked Steve.

"We're going to work them out just as we planned," promised Reed.

"He's wise," cautioned Allen. "But no one knows jest how wise."

"He's still fool enough to be fooled."

"I don't believe we've fooled thet feller much," said Allen. "If we get away with them cattle we got t' make it appear all regular an' natural, or he'll foller us t' hell an' gone but what he lands us in th' steel corral."

"I'll find a way," said Reed.

"You got t' find it right soon," said Allen. "Our little pupil is learnin' fast."

"He'll learn that he can't make a fool out of me!" cursed Reed.

"Not without overdoin' a lot o' natoor's handicraft," laughed Allen.

"I've worked and slaved here too many years to be beat out of what's mine by rights," went on Reed, angrily. "I mean to take my cleanup before I go, law or no law. If he wants to stay and run this place, let him. He hasn't got a cent, and if we round up the best of the stuff he'll go broke before he gets started."

"What are you goin' t' do?" asked Allen. "Jest walk right away with 'em an' take a chance?"

"That," said Charley, "will be too long a chance for me!"

"Me too," said Steve.

"I saw a bunch o' rustlers caught onct," said Injun John. "I don't never want t' see another!"

"You just leave the horrible details of this to me," said Reed. "I've got a scheme——"

Reed Howgan had lived long in that country. He knew every man—hundreds of them of his own stripe. He knew everyone for a hundred miles around. And he knew several who, once upon a time, had had considerable experience with the work he had in mind! So he rode over and saw old Jeff Burst.

"There ain't nothin' doin'," said Jeff, when the plan was outlined to him. "I ain't rustled no cattle since th' vigilantes jest missed me by a yard in th' dark. I aim t' live th' rest o' my life outdoors with my feet on th' ground."

"But this is only play acting," explained Reed. "Just make believe."

"That's a hoss of another color," said Jeff.

"I want to get together about a dozen of the boys, a couple of my own men will lead 'em, and just pretend to rustle that stock over the mountains to Doddie Hollow. From there I'll take charge of them and see that they're herded over to the Junction."

"You'll have to pay fer it," bargained Jeff.

"I'll pay handsome for the few hours it will take," agreed Reed. "I'll take this greenhorn up there to see his stock. Then this gang'll run them off right before our eyes."

"I see," said Jeff.

"We'll make a show of resistance, of course."

"Only," Jeff lifted a warning finger, "don't make no mistakes!"

"Everyone'll be wise to what's goin' on but this Eastern greenie."

"Suppose he gets excited and starts shootin'?"

"I'll have his rifle fixed so it won't do any harm," said Reed.

"If any lead flies," warned Jeff again, "I ain't agoin' t' be responsible fer my boys. It's sweet music t' their ears!"

IT WASN'T such a bad scheme, either! A fake raid. The stock could be led away on a hidden trail by the make-believe rustlers. Before Dorwin could do anything about it, with so much time lost in an aimless search, the cattle would be sold and Reed and the men gone for good. It would be very doubtful if Dorwin ever learned the truth about his loss.

Anyway, old Jeff and the others would be in no danger, as Reed was still foreman and manager of the ranch and he could say that he had asked old Jeff and the others to help him round up the stock and move it. They would leave the cattle just as soon as the herd was bunched and started north. Old Jeff certainly needed no rehearsing for the act. Having a good memory he was perfectly familiar with all the details of cattle rustling.

"We'll go over and look at that stock you saw the other day," said Reed to Dorwin.

"All right," agreed Dorwin, "I want to see every head of stock on this place."

"No one ever has yet," Reed smiled, good-natured with the knowledge that Dorwin was leading easily into his trap, "but we'll find out whose cattle they be, anyway."

When Reed and Dorwin came riding up the trail, a hidden watcher on a sentinel rock waved a blanket. By the time they were over the ridge a half dozen hard-riding men had a sizable bunch of steers in motion.

"Look," cried Dorwin to Reed. "Who are those riders?"

"Rustlers," yelled Reed, spurring forward. "They're driving off our stock!"

Though far out of pistol shot, Reed began shooting and yelling, which was answered immediately by riders flashing through the dust cloud behind the hurrying cattle. Dorwin, completely fooled, snatched out his own rifle—but it jammed instantly. He threw it down in disgust. He was too far away for his automatic pistol. Riding on Reed's left, close now, he reached over and snatched the loaded carbine repeater from its boot beneath Reed's leg.

"Here," yelled Reed in alarm. "Here you—" He grabbed for Dorwin's gun.

But it was too late. Dorwin tore the barrel through Reed's fingers as Reed spurred to stop him—but not in time, not fast enough. Dorwin, with a loaded rifle in his hands that had not been "fixed," began shooting at the rustlers. Reed's six-gun was now empty. Hastily he began to load it, not so easily accomplished on a running horse. Now was his time and his chance! One shot. He could lay it to the rustlers. Only one shot! Just *one* of these bright shells stood between him and victory, success, fortune!

At Dorwin's first shot a horse went down. Another rider screamed that he was hit. A bullet fairly singed old Jeff's whiskers. This was certainly not on the program and according to the rules. Neither Jeff or any of his men were the kind that would permit anyone to shoot at them without shooting back. Without hesitancy, seeing their danger, they began shooting at Dorwin in earnest. And foremost to level a rifle in real anger was Kerr, whose horse still kicked beside him. He fired and missed Dorwin, but the ball grazed the shoulder of Reed's horse coming up just behind the running sorrel. For a second or two Reed needed both hands to control the animal. When he recovered and was ready to shoot again, Dorwin had whirled away to the right, lead flying all about him, knowing that he was too near with an empty gun. He turned to Reed to yell for ammunition. In horror he dropped to his horse's neck. Reed was shooting at his back!

Reed, seeing that everything had miscarried, that his scheme had failed, mad and desperate, saw a way to profit by this sudden turn of affairs. Jeff and his men were thoroughly aroused, they were shooting to kill. If they could overtake Dorwin they certainly would shoot him down. And Reed himself, through fortunate whirling of his grazed horse, was in a position to cut Dorwin off from the back trail, or to shoot him down if he tried it. And now, as Reed knew, that one glance backward of Dorwin's had been more eloquent than any words. His true position was known, his intent disclosed, and he must stop Dorwin's tongue forever, just as he must stop his running horse.

Reed quirted across and cut Dorwin off from the trail homeward—the riders close behind, all well mounted, stood between him and any escape that way. To his immediate left was the impassable barrier of the mountains where he did not know the trails and was certain to be pocketed. But, to his right, was the desert, the great sunken bowl of rolling, endless plain, of gray sand, glistening in the hot glare of the sun, quivering with latent heat. This way was open. His only escape. And yet almost as certain death as the rifle bullets singing about his ears.

"I'd take a chance on Hades itself," muttered Dorwin, "rather than be shot down!"

He turned his horse and rode madly down and down to the great level floor of the Hot Sands country, where there was not water, nor food, nor any immediate sign of life. And after him, now at extremely long rifle range, came the other riders, pursuing him far out into the blue haze that hung quivering with heat above the hot sand.

Dorwin managed somehow to elude them. In that distorted air it was difficult to see any great distance, but still he rode on and on, not knowing or caring where, until darkness came suddenly. The sun was gone; he was alone. His horse sank wearily to its knees with a groan, never to rise again.

"Lord, Lord . . . ."

He turned away from the faithful beast that had saved his life, his face wet, grief-stricken and very lonely.

Far back on the rim of the desert in the twilight several horsemen gathered, and in their center was Reed trying to explain how it all happened.

"He ain't got away yet," Reed finished. "All we got to do is to watch this side. He's got to come out here—and soon, or die."

"He'll die," said Jeff. "No greenhorn ever rid that fur in thar an' come out alive t' tell o' it."

CHAPTER XVIII

A RANCH IS DESERTED

THE sun was gone and Dorwin was safe. Safe from the rifles of his enemies, safe from pursuit, safe from the heat that threatened to melt his brain, to strike him down, to wither and dry him.

Safe—but for what?

For a few hours he was glad to be out of the terrific sun, away from the intense heat, but long before morning he wished the sun would come back. Cold it grew, the thin air swiftly losing its daytime heat, the chill of night descending. Soon Dorwin had to keep walking on and on, aimlessly on, not knowing where, solely to keep warm. In that unnatural world of drifting sand, of scarred and naked rock, the earth burned by day and was cold by night.

Not until the ruby red of a new day hung low in the east and the pale, false light of dawn swept over the gray sand did Dorwin realize his full predicament. He stood there on a high dune, in the soft and yielding sand, looking to the east—a man alone and forlorn, his teeth chattering with cold, watching the edge of the sun come up, watching the first thin lances of silver light strike almost audibly upon the raised shields of the sandhill legions. Swiftly up, as though propelled by some giant hand, came the morning sun, and the beauty died out of it, the red and gold vanished, and now it burned fierce and bright high in the eastern sky and the heat struck him in the face like a blow.

About him there was no familiar landmark. The rim of that great bowl was but a distant and ragged purple line, unrecognizable. There was no sign of man. Nor was there at once apparent anywhere about him, earth or sky, any sign of life whatsoever—not a green leaf, not a bird in the cloudless blue, not an insect in the hot, quivering air.

"I reckon I have just postponed death a few hours," said Dorwin, trying to find courage in the sound of his own voice. "Long before night I will be wishing they had shot me—probably the day after tomorrow I will shoot myself if I can."

Tired and hungry, a bit frightened, wholly lost. Even with the points of the compass roughly indicated by the early morning sun, the knowledge did him little good because he was a stranger in a strange country. He did not dare go back to his own ranch and he had no knowledge of the country in the other directions or the shortest way out. Without food or water, or arms of any kind—for the little pistol was empty of ammunition—alone and afoot, he was frank to admit his condition was extremely serious, even though he did not give up.

"I won't exhaust myself plowing through this loose sand in the heat of day," he told himself. "I'll find some shade and hole up until the cool of night. I can't travel fast after dark but I can travel farther and I can steer by the stars."

It was a veritable ocean of sand. At first it did not seem that shade was available anywhere, but, after a few searching observations from the tops of the tallest sand dunes, he saw here and there the protruding edges of rocks as though dead mountains were buried there. Seeking one of these rock piles he was able, after a fashion, to throw up large stones into a sort of shelter which shielded him from the sun. Here he rested and waited for the night, making his simple plans.

"I am going to walk south," he decided. "I can make but a few miles each night in this hard walking, but I'll keep at it as long as I can walk—then I'll crawl! I want to live just long enough to settle with Reed. I want to see, to see——"

His lips trembled over her name. For her sake he *must* win out.

Before his shady nook he saw a bit of dried stick, faded, bleached to punk. Dorwin wondered how it came there. He reached out and got it, wondering if man had been there before. There were certain roving Indians; there was that old desert rat of a prospector they had met the first day on the incoming trail—if they could live there he could.

The desert was such a fearsome and deadly place nothing could live there, not even a bit of desert shrub. A world of emptiness wherein the slightest little thing that moves is an object of surprise and wonder. Away off in the west he saw a tiny speck riding the blue, swinging in great circles, and after a bit it seemed to drift down toward him on the very wind it rode, and he saw that it was a large bird, probably a condor. With the fear of one already condemned to death he jerked his feet back under the rocky roof of his den, sure that the great scavenger bird had seen, that it knew, that it was waiting.

BACK at the Bar R ranch-house all was excitement and mad confusion.

"Send John up with a pack of grub to the boys watching the desert," Reed ordered Allen. "Get yourself and the rest ready to move that stock to the Junction."

"Its kinda tough," said Allen slowly, and for once he did not chuckle, "t' die out there —like that."

"Well, you white livered son-of-a-gun!" bellowed Reed. "Actually sniveling!"

"Sure, I know." Allen was sorry, he'd had so much fun with that pilgrim. "I wish you'd shot him an' had it over with."

"I tried hard enough to," cursed Reed. "He's got a charmed life and, believe me, he'll need nine charmed lives to get out of where he is now."

"Nobody ever did!" Allen's voice was a bit husky.

"Even if he does crawl out alive, by the time he gets around I'll be too far away to catch, the cattle will be sold and we'll have the money in our pants."

"Oh, sure," gulped Allen.

"I'll have the cookie send out word, when it's too damn late to do any good, that this young feller got lost in the desert," went on Reed. "That'll cover our trail. He'll be here long enough to keep me informed. He can join us up north later when we get located again."

They hastily packed their war bags and collected the spare horses. The next morning, bright and early, the ranch-house was deserted. Reed had seen to it that things were left much as they were. It was as though he had taken the help and gone out on the range for some special duty for a few days and expected to be back. This would allay and divert suspicion and give them the necessary time to move the slow going stock out to market.

"If anybody really wants to know where we are," Reed told the cookie, "you just say that fool greenhorn got himself lost and we're out searching for him."

The cookie, alone in the kitchen, fed himself well. He had nothing else to do but cook and eat and he did it with skill and credit. All the delicacies he could think of, within the limits of the storeroom, he feasted upon. And he was just sitting down to the last big dinner when a rough looking man rode into the yard mounted upon a scrawny, mouse colored mule.

"Hello the house!"

Cookie did not get up. He recognized instantly, without actually seeing man or steed, just who it was, for in that vast countryside of great distances and scattered ranches, there are, now and then, such itinerant smiths. Often they are men handy with blacksmith tools, too old or too crippled, to ride any more, who pick up a scant living by traveling thus from ranch to ranch doing blacksmith work.

"Come on in, Hank," he called. "You're just in time for dinner."

Punk, the cookie, was by nature a man afraid and timid of loneliness, fearing the dark shadow of crime that hung over the place, although he had little part in it himself.

"Don't throw it away!" laughed Hank.

Once Hank had ridden. His old legs were bowed and warped, but now his back was even more crooked, the result of a fall on a mountain trail. A thin wisp of a man, pale, watery eyes, scrubby mustache, his face weathered a deep brown, his bald head white as an egg from the perpetual shade of his heavy felt hat. As he rode into the yard, the merry jingle of his smithy tools, the rattle and tingle of steel, announced his coming, his identity and his craft.

"It's always my good luck," grinned Hank as he came weaving inside, "to arrive somewhere 'bout dinner time."

"I strongly suspect," grinned the cookie, "there's a watch on t'other end of that leather shoestring!"

The cook was glad of a companion. Now he could talk, could visit. He set before Hank such a meal as the rough smith never had seen before.

"Whew," gasped he. "I see you all eats well here."

"Farewell dinner," smiled the cook.

"Farewell t' a quiet an' orderly stommick!" grinned Hank.

"Good-by Bar R."

"You don't say!" Hank was puzzled. "That young Eastern greenhorn who owns this place came out here a few weeks ago. Now he's lost in the Hot Sands country."

"You don't say!"

Hank never got anywhere to tell anybody anything, the cookie assured himself. Here was big news and ready ears; he had to talk with someone. So he told Hank. He finished with the statement that Reed and all the boys were out there now looking for the poor fool.

"Well," said Hank, helping himself to more pudding, "they sure got a job on their hands."

"No one will ever find him."

"That sand," said Hank, "will jest naturally sift over him an' bury him out o' sight th' first big blow."

Hank Durfe went on, no work to do here, jingling on down the trail toward the next place. At the forks of the V trail he hesitated, undecided which way to go. Being one of these superstitious and ignorant old men who firmly believe that life is governed and controlled entirely by chance and luck, he did not try to decide this for himself by any reasoning. Instead he flipped a coin. Chance, and chance alone, decided that he ride over to the *Rancho del Canotes!*

"Hei-hei!" gasped Jorge. *"Madre de dios!* What is this you purr into my ears!"

Hank had been born farther south and his Spanish was just as good as his English, which wasn't saying so much, both being innocent of grammar or proper pronunciation.

"A fool Eastern greenhorn like that," added Hank, "ought t' have some one ridin' herd on him all the time t' keep him from gettin' lost in the desert."

Hank spat to one side, and when he looked up to continue this important news, his audience was gone. Down the pathway he could hear the hurried *pat, pat, pat* of Jorge's leather sandals.

"Well," said Hank, "I never seen th' beat, th' way news travels in this country!"

"Señorita! Señorita——"

"What is it?" Inez called anxiously, warned by the alarm in the old man's voice.

"Thy man—he is lost—in the great desert!"

A few more words and she knew where Jorge had gotten his news. She raced away to Hank.

"When did this terrible thing happen?" she cried.

"Why, why, lassie," he said, noting her great anxiety. "Two-three days ago . . . I plumb forgot t' ask."

And she was gone.

"Well," snorted Hank, "unless a person can step lively he ain't no business 'round here today!"

Señorita Inez ran straight to her grandfather.

"Now, now, my little one," he soothed her. "Nothing is to be gained by haste."

"But he is out there in the desert!"

"We do not know where."

"And we must find him—quick!"

"You and your old grandfather, dear girl, cannot find him. We would only add two more to the toll of the desert."

"Oh, what can we do? We must do something!"

"Of course. We shall do all that we can. But first let us be sensible. In all this country there is but one who knows that desert——"

"Silver Sam!"

"Go and get him. He shall lead a rescue party," he promised.

CHAPTER XIX

MIRAGE ON THE DESERT

SOMEONE was singing in a weak, high voice, and in rythm with the words came the dull clanging of iron upon iron.

> *"My name it is Joe Bowers,*
> *I have a brother Ike*
> *In the state of Missouri,*
> *The Country of Pike."*

The words were recognizable if the tune was not!

An old, old song, by an old, old man, his mind far back in those now distant days when this song was new, when the whole Western country was new. Old Sam hushed his cracked voice and cocked one leathery ear to the scramble of a hard ridden horse being pushed up the steep trail toward his mountain shack.

"Trouble alwus rides a fast hoss," said Sam.

He turned the other ear, as though doubting the first, and heard another horse coming up behind the first.

"This hull country," he complained bitterly, "is becomin' altogether too dinged populous fer me!"

He was a little dried-up monkey of a man in faded cotton rags, standing before the rudest and roughest of cabins—a flimsy thing built of packing-case boards, old tins, corrugated powder cans cut and flattened, of everything, in fact, he could get his hands upon except suitable building material, which was not available. In his clawlike left paw an iron mortar, and in the right an iron pestle with which he had been busy beating time to his song by pounding and pulverizing a bit of quartz. All his life Sam had fought heat and cold, wind and weather, roaming the mountain wilds and deserts in search of fortune. Undismayed by all these long years of failure, barely eking out a living by prospecting, still Sam hunted on and on, now in the rough and barren heights, now in that great desert country where others feared to go and which had been searched again and again by such as he.

"Oh, Sam!"

"Well, well, well, if it ain't my leetle gal!"

"Oh, Sam," cried Inez breathlessly, "There's a man lost in the big desert."

"Thunderation!" cried Sam, petulantly. "You don't expect me t' get all excited 'bout thet, do ye?"

"He may be dying——"

"Lots an' lots o' men been lost out thar—an' most o' 'em died!"

"Not all of them, Sam—not all!"

"Not by a durn sight," grinned Sam. "I've been lost thar several times an' lived through it."

"We've got to find him, Sam."

Jorge, on a slower horse, came riding up, exploding in rattling Spanish.

"Turn him off, turn him off!" shouted Sam. "Cut it up inter words, can't yer?"

"We've come purposely to get you to help," explained Inez. "You've got to guide us out there, Sam."

"Now, now—jest wait a minute, can't ye?"

"There isn't a minute to lose!"

"Oh, there ain't! You act jest's though th' Crown Prince had gone an' lost himself!"

"It's the young man who owns the Bar R."

"Ho!" said Sam, squinting one eye at her. "So that's th' way th' wind blows, eh?"

"You've got to go."

"All right, all right. I know frum long experience I've got to do anything you say."

"You wouldn't leave a man out there to die!"

"Not your best feller——"

"Sam!"

"All right, all right. Go an' get yourself organized. I'm ready t' start jest as soon's I convince myself this here ain't th' big bonanza I've been pursuin' all my life."

PARTS of this Southwest desert country are like the great Sahara, especially the low bottoms of dead seas, dried up and gone these thousands of years, rough and barren sand, wind harried, storm tossed into long, crested waves, into rounded swells and low hillocks. All without a sign of life, without a single growing thing. But in more favored places, around alkali sinks, are fringes of dust covered prickly pear, a few dwarfed and scattered yuccas, now and then a clump of half dried greasewood. By every trick and resource this vegetation clung to the edges of the desert, stunted, withered, protecting itself from being eaten by prickers and spikes, by acrid juices and tough fibers. All of it dwarfed, drought resisting, struggling tenaciously to live just a little longer.

As the bright sun swung high in the zenith and the full power of it beat down upon the sand, the very air became like the hot breath of a furnace. It began to dance and quiver, to blur the perspective, to distort the vision and create grotesque and impossible monsters and mirages out of nothing, at any distance from the eye.

"I can live and travel three days," Dorwin told himself, "if I keep out of the sun. After that . . . ."

All night long he plodded on and on, guided by the North Star, walking slow and painfully through the loose sand. A big moon swung up early and gave him a light, a ghostly and yellowish light, almost as bright as day. Ahead of him, over the sand, flitted a specter shadow, something moving.

"It's a rabbit," decided Dorwin. "Even this desert country is not all without some form of life."

A gaunt old hare, all legs and feet and

rs, went hopping away before him. Dor- in was hungry but he had no weapon, not en a stick to throw or a stone to cast.

He wondered if hares ever drank; he ondered if this ghostly creature might lead im to water—water! For a long time he llowed it, far from his course, then recov- ing himself, he saw that he was getting where—the big hare just hopping away fore his advance.

"Foolishness," said Dorwin. "The only ay to get out of here is to keep a straight urse!"

When that night was done he had made t a few miles in the right direction. Day me, and there was no place of refuge, no caping the sun. He hung his shirt over a ied bush and tried to hunch himself in is little spot of shade, hour after hour, itching along slowly with that path of adow.

NO, THANK ye, girlie, I never ride," explained Sam, a booted foot against old Balaam's ribs as heaved on the pack rope. "Blow yourself p, you ol' bloater." Then he turned to ez and continued: "I learned t' walk fust, 'I 've been walkin' ever since. I walked l th' way out here from Missouri an' I've alked all over th' hull West. I ain't so nged weak right now I can't amble along few miles yet."

"But we could go so much faster," ar- ed Señcrita Inez.

"We're goin' t' take it nice an' easy," plained Sam. "Th' Big Thirst ain't ex- tly th' right place fer a hoss race."

"This may be a race with death!"

"Huh-huh!" grunted Sam. "Young fel- rs are mighty tough. All we got t' do is d him."

"That's just it!"

"You leave thet little detail t' Sammy. ve been huntin' hidden things out here l my life. No human bein', with all man's ill an' intelligence, can hide like a rich cket er a payin' ledge. No, siree!"

Old Sam clucked for Balaam to go ahead; parently the jack was deaf.

"You lazy, fleabitten ruminant, you—" m caught himself just in time. "Take t, then, if you've got t' be nudged!"

He brought down over the dun rump a avy stick. This, at least, reached the ck's intelligence and started it in motion.

"He drifted in from th' north side," Sam was thinking aloud for the benefit of the rest of the party. "We'll strike diagonally across from Rocky Drift t' Box Cañon——"

"Where is that?" asked Inez.

"Well," said Sam, "seein' as how I'm th' only one ever saw 'em, an' I named 'em, how can I tell you where they be?"

"You can show us."

"That's what I aim t' do!"

The old desert rat was like a dwarfed dromedary, even a small hump upon his work rounded shoulders. His wide feet rode the sandy surface, his sun dried body was seemingly devoid of all moisture, impervious to the sun. He walked with a shambling, easy gait, tireless, mile consuming. Behind him rode the girl, in sun helmet, veil, extra clothing to protect her body from the sun. Then followed Old Jorge, more familiar with the heat, and four other servants and riders from the *Rancho del Canotes,* making in all a party of seven, well provisioned and carrying water for a two days' journey, helped out by the hidden waterholes and rock wells they knew about.

A GIANT stood between Dorwin and the sun. With raised buckler Magog fended off the sharp lances of light that otherwise would have pierced him through and through. One black spot in that glare of white; one place where the threatening sun could not get at him. When first seen through the heat trembling air this Gargantuan warrior had been striding across the sand in seven league boots, a black shadow racing by his side. Nearer and yet nearer he came to the desperate youth crawling, staggering along, trying to shout for help with a throat so dry no words would come. Dizzily onward, on toward that bit of shadow which would be a shield between his tortured body and the relentless sun.

In these few seconds when victory, success, stimulated his weary mind back to consciousness, Dorwin saw that Magog was but a rock, a blackish, sand polished finger of stone reaching up from the sand. Upon hands and knees he crawled into that bit of blackness at its base and fell into a grateful, all weary asleep. Behind him in the sand was writ, for all to see, the agony of his struggle: where he had staggered on and on, where he had fallen only to rise again, where he had crawled along—a deep, twisting furrow in the gray sand. He slept.

But his weary and heat tortured mind raced like some delicate mechanism out of adjustment—this dream and that, water and food, conjuring out of imagination even worse tortures than he had endured, so that unconscious he writhed and twisted and moaned aloud. And once he half arose, and looked up with swollen eyes to mark the sun not yet gone.

"When this little shadow grows and grows," said he to himself, "when it spreads over half of the world, I must go on—on . . . I can't last but another day!"

His spent body lay there, inert, in the desert, but that which was he, on the swift pinions of a dream, winged away to a pleasant garden, where there were fig trees and peach trees, grateful shade, a green lawn and birds singing . . . A red tile roof with blue and white pigeons cooing . . . The sparkle of a lake with trees leaning far over the water . . . Came a girl in white!

Dorwin smiled in his sleep that was more like a stupor. Again he heard her voice. He opened his eyes. But this dream of dreams would not be denied, it would not go—persistent, realistic, like a desert mirage that tricks the open eyes. There she was, bending over him . . . Inez—he even heard her speak, so real was this.

"Dorwin!"

He closed his eyes.

"Let me sleep," he mumbled drowsily. "Let me keep this dream . . . ."

"Dorwin!"

"Stand back woman!" another voice boomed, half wakening him, puzzling and disconcerting to his numb senses. "Stand back, I tell ye. One shot o' this liquid reviver'll bring him 'round quicker'n all the kisses in th' world!"

CHAPTER XX

PURSUIT

IN THE cool shade of the wide veranda at the *Rancho del Canotes*, Dorwin stretched out comfortably in a big leather chair and smiled up at the girl busying about at his comfort. A solemn, wise looking yellow-headed parrot watched him with unblinking eyes.

"Qué tonto!" The bird screamed, just as though it knew what the words meant. *"Qué tonto!"*

"I don't know what it means, birdie," smiled Dorwin. "But I guess it's all right"

The anxious girl came hurrying back.

"What did you want?" she asked.

"You!" said Dorwin, truthfully.

"Oh!" She blushed.

"The parrot . . . It said somethin Spanish."

"Qué tonto!" repeated the bird.

"It is a very wise bird," said she. "I a mit that I am foolish!"

"About what?"

"You!"

Came Don Andrado, glad of compa always ready to visit.

"My house is yours—" he began in th Spanish fashion.

"Just until tomorrow," said Dorwi "Then I will ride over to my place and st cleaning it up."

"There is no hurry. Stay until you a well and strong. Again I have taken th liberty to send a rider over there and h tells me that all your men have gone."

"So they've beat it!" exclaimed Dorwi "Then all the more reason why I should b up and doing——"

"No, no, no!" Inez's arms, her hand were in the way. She would not let him u "Tomorrow will be plenty of time!"

"They are running off my stock!"

While he rested and planned Dorwi heard for the first time, in a general w from Don Andrado, the explanation of wh his ranch had not been paying for yea Beyond doubt he had been systematical robbed. Plenty of cattle had been sold ea and every year but Reed never had ma returns only on enough to just about p expenses.

"And now," sighed Dorwin, "they ha taken everything that is left!"

"You will get it all back," assured In

"You bet I will!"

"They cannot get away with all th stock in this day and age."

"Not if I can help it!"

"You rest," bade Don Andrado. "I w organize a party to follow them."

"But they have four days' start now!"

"No matter——"

Don Andrado sent his riders gallopi away throughout the whole night. Be noon the next day a sizable posse had ga ered there. Jim Howell, of Iron Mesa, a three of his riders; a Mexican rancher a two half-caste punchers; several from t Viscano ranch.

"Well, well, well," greeted gruff Jim Howell, "so you're th' owner o' th' Bar R be ye?"

Jim was rawboned, a bit rough, but strong hearted as a lion. He presented his men, by their first names.

"I've been itchin' fer quite a spell," said Jim, "t' ride over an' clean out thet nest!"

With the posse assembled, all well mounted, and Dorwin able to ride again, they galloped away to the Bar R only to find the place deserted. Here Dorwin secured a rifle and ammunition for his empty automatic.

"I ain't surprised," said Jim. "They're figgerin' on gettin' away with the cow critters an' makin' a final cleanup."

"With five days' start now," added Dorwin.

"Five days ain't so much when you're drivin' stock," said Jim, "if we only knowed which way they went."

"I can show you where I saw them last," volunteered Dorwin.

"We'll pick up their trail," added Jim. "They'll have t' move slow. Stock can't be hurried."

BUT the fickle gods of chance, seeming to play no favorites, right or wrong, now smiled upon Reed Howgan and his men. The wind whipped up, it beat its wings until the sands lifted. With swift, invisible hands it smoothed out and covered over the trail of their going. For years Reed had been working cattle out this way, over hidden trails, by secret passes, the knowledge of which he had gathered by bribing the desert Navajos. He had little to fear, and a bit of wind was to his liking.

"She's come on to blow," he spoke to Allen. "They'll never find us now."

"I hope you're right," said Allen.

"There ain't a soul that knows all these desert and mountain trails but me," boasted Reed.

"It ain't so darned easy to hide all them cattle, even in th' Rocky Mountains," said Allen.

"We ain't going to hide them," answered Reed. "We're going to get them out to the railroad in jig time and turn them into cash money before anyone knows where they are. I can get hard money right on the dot when we deliver. Then we'll split and ride away."

"Sounds good," admitted Allen. "An' I sure hope it works."

"Why shouldn't it work?" demanded Reed angrily.

"I dunno," sighed Allen.

"What's the matter with you lately, anyway?"

"I jest don't feel light hearted an' joyful no more," sighed Allen.

"You're scared," accused Reed.

"My ha'r ain't turned white yet," Allen answered, with a feeble smile.

"You'll feel all right when you get your share in your belt."

"When I do," said Allen, "I'll show you how t' ride!"

MILES behind them the pursuing posse were searching fruitlessly for the trail.

"They must have growed wings," said the baffled Jim.

"Certainly they haven't traveled any of the regular trails," said one rider.

"I imagine," pondered Jim, "they knew a better and safer way. That man Reed was always cunnin'."

"All we can do now," added Dorwin, "is to ride back and try to intercept the stock at every shipping point. We can wire——"

"That won't do," interrupted Jim. "Reed's got everything all fixed. He aims t' sell t' people jest as crooked as he is. You'll never hear o' them steers ag'in if Reed gets 'em out."

"What can we do?" asked Dorwin, puzzled.

"It sure looks, sonny, as though 'nothin'' was th' proper answer."

They made a hurried camp, to rest and feed the horses, to prepare rations for themselves. But Dorwin could not eat. He felt the bitterness of defeat; he hated so to give up.

"There ain't no use cryin' over spilt milk," spoke Jim. "We've done th' best we could——"

"If we could find old Sammy," began Dorwin. "He knows this country better than any other man."

"It would be easier to find them cow critters," grinned Jim over a huge sandwich. "That ol' desert rat is always away over th' hills. They won't be able t' find that man on th' Judgment Day!"

But they all admitted that old Sammy would be a valuable acquisition if he could be found.

"If you stick t' th' cattle business," advised Jim, "you've got t' learn t' take your losses with a smile."

"It isn't altogether that," said Dorwin. "I hate to see Reed get away with anything."

"He's been gettin' away with murder fer years."

"And now," said Dorwin firmly, "is the time for a settlement!"

They rested, men and beasts, in the black shade of the cañon wall. The tired men sprawled out in the soft and yielding sand and slept. An hour or more later Dorwin, only half dozing with his mind so troubled, was aroused by a distant and yet distinct voice speaking.

"You linger here long enough t' make a shadder an' I'll whale y'!" Followed a loud whack. "Now, you mangy ol' rabbit, amble!"

As Dorwin jerked upright, a little beast under a mountainous pack came scrambling up the trail, followed by a shambling old man.

"Fer cripe's sake!" ejaculated Sammy as he saw their camp. "If this here country ain't gettin' t' be a regular picnic ground!"

"Hello, Sam," greeted Dorwin.

"All o' you sleepin' your fool heads off when you're supposed t' be after them crooks."

"We had to give it up, Sam," explained Dorwin.

"Fer why?" the old man wanted to know.

"Lost th' trail," explained Jim, sitting up.

"I knowed it," grinned Sam. "I felt in my old bones you couldn't do anything without old Sam."

From the crossfire of explanatory conversation Sam was able to gather that they had not been able to pick up any sign on any of the known trails.

"O' course not," cried Sam. "Fer th' simple reason they didn't go that way!"

"It's th' only way they could go," answered Jim.

"Is thet so?" sniffed Sam.

"How could they get out o' this country with all that stock an' not go over th' trails?" demanded Jim.

"You're a fine bunch o' amatoor vigilantes," sneered old Sam. "You made a great show o' ridin' out here an' now you've lost th' trail."

"I suppose," sneered someone, "you can walk right over there somewhere an' find ye?"

"If I can't show you cow tracks in two hours' ridin'," replied Sam, "then I'll eat this tough an' grisly ol' jackass o' mine!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE RECKONING

THAT the whole countryside was old Sam's dooryard, so to speak, and that he knew it as no other man, was fact. The secret trail Reed Howgan had used for so many years was known to Sam. He had seen cattle marks in that trail before, though he never gave it a thought one way or the other. He led the party up this cañon and that, a maze of winding passes, and finally to a muddy waterhole where the soft ooze had been churned by the feet of cattle.

"Thar," said he proudly, "what'd I tell ye?"

"They passed this way," said Dorwin, "but that was days ago."

"It's a hard trail." Jim surveyed the country thereabouts. "We can't ride over it fast enough t' catch up with them."

"Hold your breath," grinned Sam. "I ain't done yet!"

"We are," sighed Dorwin.

"Not by a durn sight," cried Sam. "I ain't been galwinatin' over these mountains, year after year, all fer nothin'. I've acquired a remarkable familiarity with th' topography, geology, flory and funa o' these here parts, even if I ain't struck it rich."

"What else do you know?" asked Dorwin, suspecting something.

"I know a short cut——"

"For horses?" asked Dorwin.

"If they're th' climbin' kind," answered Sam, "an' light on their feet."

In a few words he told them of a high trail, difficult and dangerous, but their only hope if they wished to catch up with Reed.

"We'll take three-four o' th' boys on th' best mountain horses," agreed Jim, "an' make a try fer it."

The others were left behind to ride back to the *Rancho del Canotes* and from there send word out to the various officials who could watch shipping points.

The rest rode up, up and up. It was a hard trail. It did not seem possible to Dorwin, unfamiliar with high mountains and horses trained to climb, that anyone could ride that way. Up the steep sides of cañons, from ledge to ledge, down again, sliding over banks of loose shale, plunging, leaping, down and down, into great crevices split into the very heart of the mountains. All day and all night Sammy and his jack kept in the lead, showing the way, walking on and on, tireless. Blind cañons: but the old man knew a tortuous way out; narrow passes; but he found a way to squeeze through. No difficulty barred their progress but what the old prospector solved it. Then at last, late in the afternoon of the next day, Dorwin rode out upon a narrow shelf of rock against the bulging mountain shoulder and saw before him, far off in a wide valley, a long, straggling herd of cattle being driven slowly by a dozen pigmy riders.

"Thar," shouted old Sam triumphantly, "is what you're lookin' fer!"

"I reckon it's your stock all right," agreed Jim. "We'll ride down an' see it, but if it is, you won't get it without a fight."

"I'll fight," said Dorwin. "I won't be robbed without a struggle!"

"I don't blame ye!"

"Who'll fight along with me?" asked Dorwin, looking anxiously from one to the other.

"I ain't got no gun," said Sam, "but if someone'll loan me one I'll go with ye."

"Jest what," Jim spat over his left arm, "jest what'd we all come way up here fer anyway if it wasn't t' fight?"

"Thar's a way down," said Sam. "I'll show ye."

At some remote period in the earth's history a great stream of water in this waterless spot had torn a sliding trough down the mountainside, reaching far out to the sandy plain below. This offered the only possible descent for horses, although a man might have scrambled down most anywhere. Heading into this ravine Dorwin led the way, slipping and sliding, making his way down.

REED, riding up to the dust covered Allen, spoke to cheer him.

"Another day'll see us in the clear."

"I hope you're right," muttered Allen, his old cheerfulness quite gone.

"I know I'm right," laughed Reed. "The chances are a hundred to one they never find that fool—and if they do it'll be too late to follow us, even supposin' they could find our trail."

"You make it sound pretty," agreed Allen.

"Just another day—" began Reed.

"What's that over thar?" interrupted Allen in an anxious voice.

"Over where?"

"That dust risin' up over yonder!"

Reed looked at this thin veil of dust puffing up out of the wash. All was dust, dust covered, a dusty haze before them where the cattle plodded along; dust spurting upward from their own horses' feet.

"Maybe some of the cattle tried a break for the hills," suggested Reed.

"Looks mighty suspicious t' me," said Allen.

"Might be a bunch o' mountain sheep leggin' it for cover."

"It might," sighed Allen, "but——"

Just then Dorwin and his followers broke out of the wash into the open and came riding furiously towards them.

"God in the brush!" gasped Reed, surprise, terror, wrath, all commingled. "If it ain't that damned Eastern dude!"

His heavy gun boomed a warning to all his scattered riders—he spurred forward shouting, pulling his loaded rifle from its saddle holster.

Cornered rats will fight. Out of the dust cloud riding above the moving herd, came rider after rider, answering Reed's signal, half a dozen armed and determined men, desperate and dangerous, knowing that they must shoot their way out, preferring death to capture. They rode head on into the fight, crouching low in their saddles, repeating rifles blazing madly in one desperate and vicious charge.

"Swing off," shouted Dorwin, seeing that they were outnumbered and certain to lose men if the charge came home. "Pull to the right—behind that cut bank!"

He spurred his own horse towards the near-by bank of a dry stream bed. Before the others could pull in behind him two of their horses were down.

"Now they've got us trapped," yelled Jim as he came sliding down to safety.

"Drive them off," ordered Dorwin. "Keep them back or we'll all be shot down!"

Dorwin, with experience in trench warfare, took immediate command. He placed his men along the rim of the bank and turned the charging horsemen with a fusillade of shots.

"Shoot their horses," he ordered. "Shoot at the horses!"

No easy mark, these running ponies; harder yet to hit the men crouching low over their necks. Dust and sand and bullets tossed in the face of the defenders; spurts of dirt answered every shot at the racing horsemen.

"Get back out of that!" bellowed Reed, dashing up to recall his men. "Get back!"

He saw instantly that the men entrenched in the wash had every advantage. They could not be dislodged without serious loss; and Reed's cunning brain, functioning best in emergencies, was quick to take advantage of another circumstance in his favor.

"Scatter—spread out!" he yelled, riding among his men. "Three of you dig in and hold them right where they are. Charley—Steve—John. Surround them—dig in, dig in! Hold them there, they can't get out, and the rest will drive the stock on."

This was good strategy. Reed and two of his men, stationed so as to command the wash, quickly dug in at the most advantageous points, so as to prevent anyone from riding up out, while the others moved the cattle. Everything that showed itself above the edge of the bank invited a well directed bullet. Dorwin could see the dust cloud marking the progress of the cattle moving away, and knew that they were trapped.

"We've got to go over the top," he announced.

"There'll be dead men here if we do," answered Jim.

"If we don't they can hold us here as long as they want to."

"All them cattle won't do you much good," warned Jim, "looking back at 'em from th' spirit land."

"We've got to do something!"

"Name it, sonny," said Jim, "an' if it's reasonable we'll do it."

THE incredible thing Dorwin started to do made even Jim gasp. He saw the youth dig a shallow notch in the bank, rattling the dirt down, working a ditch, or trench, through the loose sand so he could wriggle unobserved along it to a near-by patch of scrubby sage.

"Don't!" whispered Jim hoarsely. "Don't try it. They'll shoot you like a snake. You're th' one they want t' get!"

"I am going to get that man!" Dorwin flung back. He was thinking of Reed.

Now Dorwin was again the big game hunter; biggest of all big game—man hunting man. An armed and desperate fighting man, a known killer, crouching out there on the valley floor behind a little heap of protective sand, and Dorwin had started out to get him. If he could stalk and capture the leader all the others would run, the fight would end without bloodshed. Otherwise. . . .

Never did hunter of Eastern forests stalk a feeding deer with greater skill and patience. Dorwin was aided by the fact that Reed did not even imagine that such a thing was possible in that all but open country, with its dwarfed and spare vegetation. He never dreamed that anyone would come crawling toward him.

The riflemen behind Dorwin, understanding his purpose, now kept Reed entertained and busy with a ceaseless spray of bullets. This served to restrict Reed's range of vision, and kept his attention directed to the front. Within the first few yards Dorwin realized that he could not accomplish this all but impossible feat if hampered by his rifle. Now that he had started on this mad venture he determined to risk all on the chance and abandoned the weapon. This left him no other protection than his small automatic, useless except at close range.

Slowly, cautiously, he wriggled along, now this way and now that, as the cover permitted, but always in the general direction of the unsuspecting Reed. Dorwin took a chance that none of the men driving the cattle would come riding back when he was in the open. He skirted clumps of low shrubs; he crawled behind low hillocks; his dust covered clothing blended perfectly with the dusty earth. He purposely rubbed dust on his hands, on his face, to make them less conspicuous. Often he only inched along. Once a deeper hollow permitted him to run crouching for a considerable distance. Nearer, nearer. . . .

Reed had thrown up before him a high bank of sand, scooping out a considerable hollow with his rifle butt, and in this he lay comfortable and secure, peering out cautiously every now and then, never looking behind him. Having worked far along to Reed's right, away from his direct vision, Dorwin took greater chances and, at last, was safely in his rear.

Reed never dreamed that anyone was behind him until his very brain was stunned by a low voice that he recognized instantly.

"Well, Reed, I guess we better declare an armistice and agree upon the terms of surrender!"

For a few seconds the man there was as though dead—dead in everything but brain, for his strong body, now for the first time, refused to move. Then slowly, with visible effort, he twisted his sweat streaked and dusty face over his right shoulder, as one hearing a ghostly voice expects to see a ghostly figure. But, when he recognized Dorwin in the flesh, and saw that the youth carried no rifle, he came to his feet quick as any cat and fired his carbine from the hip—only to sink slowly down again, his left arm over his eyes, to shut out some fearsome apparition as Dorwin's automatic spurted!

CHAPTER XXII

A TURN IN THE ROAD

"I AM going to fix the old place all up again." Dorwin was enthusiastic about his plans for the future. "I am going to bring down the water and have trees and grass and flowers."

"That will be nice," Inez sighed.

Dorwin looked around at her, questioning this sigh, but the wide blue eyes were fixed steadily upon the blue distance.

"You bet it will be nice." Inez moved a bit nearer to him on the big rock where they sat looking down over the Bar R Ranch. "You just wait until I get a grove of trees——"

"That will be a long time to wait," said the girl, with another sigh. "Trees do take so long to grow."

"To wait for what?" Dorwin asked, looking at her with a puzzled expression.

"Why, why—the trees, of course!"

"I won't do a thing to that old ranch-house! Remodel it, new furniture, a decorator from the city——"

"It took hundreds of years to grow the trees at home," she said softly.

"Oh!" said Dorwin.

"And generations of men in the cattle business to make that place what it is today."

"Well, I can make a start, anyway."

"Why?"

"My goodness, girl!" he exclaimed, not understanding. "Because I am doing it for you—that's why!"

"Oh," she exclaimed. "For me!"

"And a lot you care!"

"I don't care a *centavo* about your old ranch," Inez told him, truthfully.

"But I do!" said Dorwin a bit hurt.

"By the time you get it all fixed up I shall be an old woman!"

"Ah!" he said, a light dawning.

"Grandfather," said she very seriously, "could not live anywhere else than at the *Rancho del Canotes.*"

"Of course not," he agreed.

"And he cannot live there alone!"

"Oh," said Dorwin. "You mean—ah—Inez!"

"If you can think of a better place to live than my home," she said, smiling over her rounded shoulder at him, "I will gladly go there with you!"

"I can't," he confessed.

His arms opened; she swayed towards him. . . .

Behind them, unnoticed in the trail, an old man turned quickly as though the unwilling witness of something he should not see, kicking a drowsy jack in the ribs.

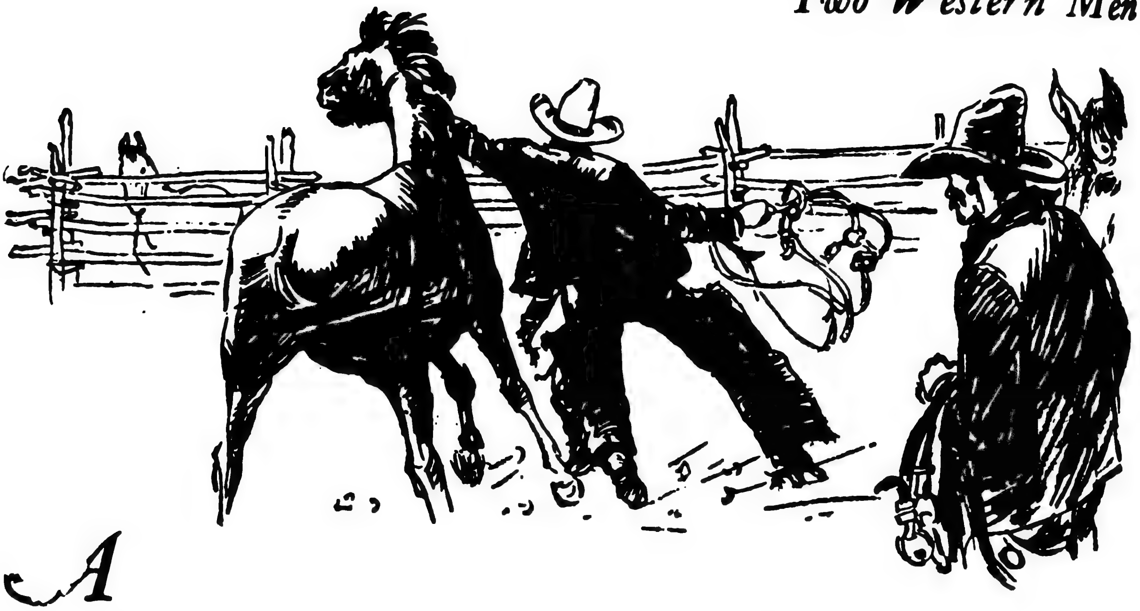
"Balaam, you durned old fool," he scolded hoarsely. "Standin' there a-lookin' unashamed at other folks' privacy!"

There was another kick which would have been audible as any drum to anyone else but lovers.

" 'Bout face, you ol' rock lizard. Make motions as though you were goin' somewhere except t' sleep, or I'll h'ist your hams clean up under yer ears!"

THE END

A Stirring Story of
Two Western Men



A SOLOMON *of the* RANGES

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

THAT quarrel between McCart and Rennie had, on the surface, as unreasonable a beginning as a quarrel could possibly have. It seemed to be largely a matter of a cold dawn, of a piercing wind, of fractious horses, of men hurled from warm bunks to start a hard day's work. Actually it may have developed because Rennie was what he was.

Against discomforts like those named, punchers usually lock their lips or pour out their feelings upon their horses. They might have hated their best friends in such moments, but they knew the danger of letting their feelings get away with them. It was much easier, much juster, to keep back angry words than to back them up later on when a man had cooled off and didn't want to back them up.

Everybody was having trouble with his horse, Rennie most of all. The men wanted to saddle the horses as quickly as possible; the horses didn't want to be saddled at all. It had been a cold night and the horses had nosed about the ranch-house and the bunkhouse, probably wondering in their equine way why the humans on this ranch should be warmly housed while they were left in the open.

As the night had begun to pass, the horses had withdrawn from the buildings, through some instinct of stubborness, and the wrangler had had trouble in herding them in. Rennie prided himself on his horsemanship. He prided himself on his ability to put the gear on any horse with neatness and dispatch. His anger rose when his horse fought the cold bit and distended himself against the cinches. Ten minutes passed before Rennie was ready to hop to the saddle.

Meantime McCart had come from the house with his bit between his hands. He had humanely taken his bridle into the house, to warm the bit before the kitchen fire. While Rennie had struggled with his horse, McCart stood and watched him. Intent on his job, Rennie had not noticed this till he had vaulted into the saddle. Then McCart had had a struggle with his own mount. It was a briefer struggle than Rennie had had. Finding the bit warm against his lip, the horse had accepted it. He seemed in fact to take a little pleasure in champing it. With the saddle on his back he distended himself expectantly for the cinches, but a word and a light blow from McCart had caused him to let his barrel become normal.

Whether he was thus obedient because he had something on his mind or whether that wily something popped into his mind just as McCart went up on him, no man shall say. Anyhow McCart was off guard. In fact he was congratulating himself on being a humane sort of fella. If you were good to a horse, he was reasoning, a horse would be good to you. That was common sense. It was these here fellas that abused horses that had trouble with them. Now, his warming that bit had proved to this particular horse that McCart had the animal's comfort in mind. The horse was responding by making things comfortable for his rider. He had taken the bit, he had accepted the cinches, and now he was letting his rider climb to his seat without any indulgence in morning pitching.

Yes, he was! McCart had no sooner settled his feet down in the stirrups and had lifted himself preparatory to finding the soft places in the old saddle than the horse went festively into action. McCart knew what was coming before the first jump, and he was right there. That is, he was right there so far as he himself was concerned. The horse might as well have tried to buck off a burr as to have tried to buck off McCart. McCart knew it; the horse would presently know it. Then all would be well.

But for Rennie, preparing to turn his own horse, not so good. McCart was busy trying to keep the pitching horse's head up. That, so far as McCart was concerned, was the main thing. Let the doggoned jack rabbit hop this way, that way, or yonder, so far as McCart cared. A little exercise in the morning did man or beast no harm.

The horse hopped yonder, sideways. That carried him in the direction of Rennie's turning animal. The two horses crashed together. Rennie's horse had been quiet for the moment, but now he seemed to say to himself that there was no good in a horse's being quiet. Gosh, if that other horse could act so sportively, why couldn't he act the same way? So he, too, jumped. He jumped straight up and came down with his legs as stiff as pokers. Unprepared for it, Rennie had a moment during which he was in danger of being jostled out of the saddle. His hand clutched the horn ever so briefly. But ever so briefly was enough. As Rennie straightened up, cursing, somebody laughed. It was a good-natured laugh, but it seemed to be poison to Rennie. He fought his horse to a standstill, and then he turned in his saddle and his eyes went over the men.

"Who laughed?"

Rennie's eyes were as cold as ice. His mouth, too, was as if it had been frozen after he had uttered those two words. Only silence greeted his question. It was the silence of astonishment. Why, what did the fella mean by looking like that just because somebody had had a humorous moment? God knew that anything that could make a man laugh on a morning like this was a welcome incident.

McCart, meantime, had got his own horse under control. The animal had swerved away from Rennie's horse after that first jarring impact. The men were now some five feet from each other. Rennie came back in his saddle, so that he looked directly across at McCart.

"Can't yuh handle that damn bronc of yours?" Rennie demanded.

"Why, I reckon I can," McCart retorted. "I seem to be."

"Don't let him jam into me again like that," said Rennie; and there was the quarrel full-fashioned by the ordinary happening.

Two horses had crashed together, and a man's anger had flooded through him redly. Afterwards punchers said that Rennie's getting mad was the silliest thing ever they had seen. What they didn't know was that this incident had been but a flaming match put to long accumulated powder.

RENNIE, in fact, was jealous of McCart. He was jealous of his youth. He was jealous of his good looks. He was jealous of his amiability. McCart was just turned twenty-one. The joy of living shone in that youngster's face. And that face was pleasing, the features well fashioned, the high color of good health beneath the tan in the cheeks. McCart's hair was like copper, too dark for mere blondness, too light for deep red.

McCart had a way with him, too. He was a rambler. He had rambled into this nook of the Oregon country two months ago. He had looked at the old-timers with a deprecating grin on his lips, as if to ask them what they thought of his butting in here, but also as if to assure them that there was no harm in him. He had got by famously with everyone except Rennie.

Rennie was a dark man—dark of skin, dark of hair, dark of eye. He was a somber man. None there could remember having seen him smile. He did not withdraw from the other men. He could hardly do that. But he had a habit when arguments were under way of sitting on his heels, chewing a blade of grass and gazing off toward the horizon. That was all right. He didn't have to talk if he didn't want to talk. Just so long as he minded his own business. . . .

And here he was now flaring out at the kid, threatening the kid, intimating the kid had been at fault and that he had better not be at fault again. Out of the men's first astonishment grew a little wonder. That wonder was as to what the kid would say and do. The men knew now that they had believed all along that the kid was not very substantial. He was a nice boy and all that. He could ride. They supposed he could shoot, as almost every man could shoot in that older time. They had seen him handle a rope efficiently. But going up against a man like Rennie would require not alone the usual ability of a cowpuncher. It would require courage.

This Rennie was forty, but he was a slight and a correspondingly agile man. He was comparatively a newcomer here, and the men had never seen him in a jam; but they believed now that they had known all along that he would be a bad actor if he were ever caught in a jam. The fact was that they were accepting quickly formed opinions, in this moment, as opinions they had formed some time ago. Yeah, the kid was a nice boy but probably rather soft. He would be no match for that dark Rennie, with the icy eyes and the harsh, commanding voice.

Huh?

That inelegant, questioning ejaculation might have hopped from lip to lip, being clearly enunciated by each man before it hopped again, so conscious were the men that it had been audible among them. Probably somebody had uttered it in a kind of stupefaction, and it had so definitely expressed the men's amazement that they had thought they, too, had uttered it.

For McCart was surprising them. McCart had brought his horse around with a certain and effective hand. The horse might have just decided to be good or the spirit of his rider might have been communicated to him. In any event he came about and stood perfectly still.

Rennie brought his own horse around, but the animal did not respond to his guidance as well as McCart's horse had done. That doubtless angered Rennie the more. It was as if his horsemanship did not equal McCart's. Rennie hurt the horse's mouth with the bit. He raked him with his spurs. He cursed him. The horse danced and spun and lifted himself, but presently Rennie quieted him; and so the horses stood at last nose to nose.

Young McCart, meanwhile, had fumbled the makings from his shirt pocket. His reins dropped, he rolled a cigaret, but he did not take his eyes from Rennie's face. It was an impudent act. It was a youthful, insulting act. Rennie's own eyes widened till the blacks of them—and the pupils seemed all black now—swam in the whites of them. Rennie took a single breath with such force and suddenness that it seemed as if it must whistle through his lips.

"Why, you —!" said Rennie.

It was a foul epithet. It was such an epithet as no man could accept. McCart's cigaret was now in his mouth, unlighted. It had been placed there by a perfectly steady hand. That hand had been dropped to McCart's thigh. Now it moved. It was the quick, certain hand of youth, and it proved itself to be a trained hand. It plucked McCart's gun, and Rennie found himself covered.

All those who sat their horses, staring, expected McCart to do one of two things. They expected him to go cold and hard and rigid in his saddle, as a man should in a case like that; or they expected him to begin to bluster and curse and threaten, as a man should not, in a case like that.

McCart did neither of those things. McCart laughed. It was not a triumphant laugh. It was not an intentionally insulting laugh. It was just a chuckle in which there was genuine mirth. So lightly, that laugh seemed to say, did McCart hold this new enemy.

Rennie goggled. He seemed to be taken wholly by surprise. He was doubtless surprised that, in the first place, McCart had

had the courage to face him so, and, in the second place, that McCart could laugh while he did face him. Rennie was motionless in his saddle for a space. That attitude, the men seemed to know, would not hold for long. Rennie himself could do one of two things: He could try to draw his own gun in the face of that other threatening gun already drawn; or he could back his horse away and withdraw from the encounter. What *would* Rennie do? He must be consumed with bitter rage. A lust to make a sieve of this presuming youngster must be in him. Those men could imagine Rennie shooting McCart from his saddle—if he could—and then firing bullets into his prostrate body till his gun was empty. In this fashion would his rage vent itself.

What Rennie would have done was never known. The door of the ranch-house was opened. The foreman of the outfit stood there. His old eyes took in the situation at a glance. He stepped down from the sill and strode over to the men.

"What do you think is comin' off here?" he barked. "Put up that gun, McCart. Rennie, if you make a move after he puts it up, I will take you apart. Get about your work. We will be busy for a week or more. If either of you two jaspers starts anything in that time, he will have to answer to me. Understand?"

McCart holstered his gun. Rennie backed his horse away. Both of them held that old foreman in respect. He had been a famous man in this country in his day, and that fame had yet to be dimmed. He was not only as good a man as either of those two younger men, but his friends were scattered far and wide. If harm came to Old Rath, the perpetrator of that would have to answer almost to as many men as were scattered in any direction for two hundred miles.

Nobody wanted any of Old Rath's game. In this particular case Rennie wanted none of it because he knew that he would lose before he started. McCart wanted none of it, for Old Rath had stirred in that boyish heart a profound respect from the moment McCart had first met Rath and had heard about him.

And that, possibly, was as good an indication as there was of the difference between McCart and Rennie. And that difference was significant.

II

"WE WILL be busy for a week," Rath had said; and they had been busy for a week and the job was not yet done. That job was the gathering of the cattle from the summer uplands and the herding of them into the valleys. Then would come the selection of those that were to be driven to the shipping point and such branding as was necessary.

This involved hazardous riding. The uplands were not places for timid men. It involved also the combing of out-of-the-way places. Following their habits, the cattle grazed in bunches, and these had to be sought out. And the weather was not good. Autumn was at hand. Winter would soon crowd in on autumn's heels. The first night out, there had been a mild electrical storm, a storm which had seemed to want to rend and tear but which was unable to get going. Then there had been a day of heavy skies and some rain. Men rolled into their blankets wet and tired. They rose in no very good humor. Then there came a clear day with a smart breeze. Spirits rose. They sank when a wet night followed, and a down-hanging sky was the morning's greeting.

McCart and Rennie had been busy, and the wise Rath had seen that they were kept apart in the daytime. At night they were watchful of each other. They had one run-in. McCart had gone to the wagon for coffee. Two men came up behind him and he filled their cups. Filling his own cup, then, McCart turned. Rennie was just behind him. Rennie had been holding out his cup. McCart looked at it, grinned, looked Rennie full in the face and grinned. He turned away.

Rennie muttered. McCart could not make out what he said, but McCart turned and faced him. Thus they stood for ten seconds, two armed men, hating each other in that brief time. Old Rath came up to them swiftly, and he stood looking at first one and then the other. McCart went on his way.

"Can't I look at him?" Rennie demanded wrathfully of the foreman.

Rath was silent. He maintained that silence for a full minute while Rennie stared at him. Then Rennie filled his cup and retreated.

"For God's sake, man, stop it," Rennie's nearest neighbor pleaded. "When Rath goes still like that, the storm is about to bust."

Rennie said nothing, and this puncher, not being very observant, thought that caution had come to Rennie. The gray dusk still held a little. The fire banished this twilight where Rennie sat. McCart was across from him. McCart could see Rennie's face plainly. The man had lifted his head at his neighbor's whispered words. McCart found something in Rennie's face, and that something was fear.

Having eaten, McCart drew apart and fell to wondering. So fear could touch Rennie, could it? He was, then, not the hardy man he professed to be. McCart was filled with a profound disgust, for McCart had a lively and youthful loathing of fear. He could not remember that he had ever been afraid. His was not an imagination which was ever troubled by any previsions of disaster. He had a creed. That creed was that a man should take whatever befell him and make the most of it. If McCart had known, at any given time, that he was to die the next moment, he would have prepared to die gallantly. There were times when he thought that a gallant death would be a finer thing than a pleasant life. He was young, and he was not unaware of splendor. He had found it in dawns and starry nights, in rushing winds, in the beat of rain, and the drive of snow. Yes, he was young and he loathed fear.

He studied Rennie's face as Rennie finished his food. That face was not so harsh as it had been. In fact, it seemed to McCart that all the marks of Rennie's forty years were suddenly in it. It was as if that passing fear had torn aside a mask which Rennie wore.

McCart suddenly became matter-of-fact in his thinking. He arrived at what he considered a just conclusion. Rennie had stood up to him because he was young and Rennie was old, forty being old to twenty-one. Rennie could not see, McCart supposed, how an untrained youth could expect to stand up to a man of Rennie's years and experience. Standing up to old Rath was another and a different matter.

So Rennie was afraid of Rath? What would the result of that be, so far as McCart was concerned? Why, Rennie's hate would grow. The resentment he would like to show to old Rath, he would heap on McCart. That certainly would be natural.

A little grin came to McCart's lips as he gazed at the fire.

Before he turned in, Rath sought him out.

"Watch yourself, boy," Rath said. "That fella Rennie will be on the warpath from now on."

"I'll watch myself," McCart promised.

In that moment he did not think of Rennie. He only remembered that his own inferences had fitted perfectly with Rath's, and Rath was an old-timer, a man of great natural and acquired wisdom. McCart was suddenly inspired with a new ambition. That was to live to be as old as Rath and to be like him in that old age, a man who was held to be as good today as he had ever been. Yes, he would watch Rennie. He wasn't going to let Rennie snuff him out. Too, he would counsel with Rath.

A bit of a dreamer, young McCart.

III

McCART, the next afternoon, was riding alongside a bunch of cattle which he and two other men had picked up in an outlying nook. They were heading the cattle toward a cut in the hills. Beyond this cut was a flat, hill-enclosed. If they could get the cattle out on this flat, they could hold them for the night by the simple expedient of guarding the head of the cut through which they would pass and the head of another cut across the flat, a distance of perhaps three quarters of a mile. Then they would drive them on in the morning.

Young McCart was in high feather. There was nothing of the usual in this situation. It was to McCart a vivid drama set on a big stage; for the storm which had been threatening for days had at length overcome whatever had been opposing it. The day had been gray in its beginning. At noon it had been somber and still. In the middle of the afternoon great black clouds had piled up in the northwest. They had hung there for a while, and then they had spread over the gray. Now, though the time of sunset was nearly an hour away, the darkness was almost as of night. There had been some muttering of thunder and a few hesitant, shivering flashes of lightning.

McCart knew that a storm was about to break. Instead of being afraid of it, he thrilled to it. Let 'er boom, let 'er crash! He would watch it all with lifted head. Whatever thoughts he had would not be common thoughts, and they would be his own.

In spite of what was a kind of elation, he did not lose sight of the business in hand. It was important that the cattle be headed into the cut before the storm broke. Cattle did not like thunder and lightning. Those could stampede them. Again McCart was not afraid of a stampede. Indeed there would have been exhilaration for him in checking one and in rounding up the cattle later on. But cattle were cattle. They represented money. In addition to other qualities he had McCart was loyal. He and those two other men were expected to look after such cattle as they found. McCart would do his best to look after these.

He therefore kept an eye on the cattle in the gloom. He judged that the approaching storm had not as yet made them nervous. The column was moving forward as it should. No bovine heads had yet been lowered, none shaken.

But you never can tell, McCart well knew. The beginning of a stampede was a matter of a moment. The cattle must be aware of the coming of the storm. If it struck suddenly, it could easily bring terror to the brutes.

So McCart rode with a hand on the rump of his horse, his body half turned in the saddle. Suddenly there was a faint, tearing sound behind the rider. It was as if a gigantic cloth was being slowly ripped. The sound died in a whisper. There was a shiver of lightning apparently beyond the horizon. And then the sky, from horizon to zenith, was torn asunder. A vivid flame like a great snake leaped upward. The crash of the thunder was deafening.

All the landscape about McCart was illuminated by that lightning, which seemed to hold strangely long. He could see afar. He could see the column of cattle, with the two other men on their flanks. He was aware of a kind of shivering that seemed to run along the ground.

He looked at the cattle nearest him. The leaders had stopped. Their heads were down. There was an immediate tossing of heads. In the silence which had succeeded the crash of thunder, McCart could hear a low bellow. Fear! It was running through the little herd. That fear brought no loathing to McCart. Dumb animals might be expected to be fear filled. The unknown to man was doubly unknown to them.

The leaders of the cattle began to trot then. Their heads were upflung now and tossed from side to side. McCart knew those leaders had no objective now. They were just going somewhere to escape they knew not what. They might keep on as they were going, or they might swerve to either side. The cattle behind would follow where the leaders went.

McCart decided that what the leaders needed was a leader for themselves. He waited. The lightning broke again, but now it was a fanlike thing instead of a riving thing, and it held for a long time. No sun suddenly raising itself in that northwestern sky could have illuminated the landscape more.

McCart acted at the very beginning of that illumination. He forged his horse ahead and came in, in front of the leaders. He set his horse at a pace which was an accommodation to the pace which the leaders had now struck. If the lightning would flare often enough, he could pilot the cattle into the cut and so bring them safely out on the flat. There he and the other men could circle them and start them to milling. Thus they could be held till the storm had worked its will.

THE lightning was almost incessant now. There were a few seconds in between each flare during which McCart could hear the thud of the hoofs behind him. The cattle, sensing that there was ahead of them a horse which knew where it was going, were coming on at no increased pace.

In a vivid flare the rider saw the head of the cut before him. He headed straight into it. Behind him the cattle came on. Just before he reached the cut there was another trembling flare. He headed his horse into the cut. He was glad the cattle had been strung out in a long column. There would be room in the cut for them, no matter at what speed they elected to travel.

The cut was no more than a quarter of a mile long. Its sides were almost sheer and its bed flat. Turning in his saddle, he looked back. The cattle had slowed down a little but they were still coming on. The gap between his horse and them had widened somewhat, and he drew down so that it should become as it had been. The lightning died altogether for the time, but McCart could hear the patter of hoofs on the hard bed behind him.

There was presently a little lightening ahead of him, and he knew that the end of the cut was just before him. Reassured by the silence and the fact that the dim shape of the horse was still there, the cattle seemed to be coming on more sedately.

McCart rode out of the cut.

Two things immediately happened. The heavens appeared only to have rested. There was, of a sudden, vivid lightning and crashing thunder. It was a very bombardment of lightning. McCart looked up. Above him was a point of rock. There was the effect of a ball of fire hurtling to the pinnacle of that rock. It seemed to bounce off there, and McCart was aware of a splintering. He had a moment of awe. For the first time in his life he had seen an object struck by lightning.

By now he was out in the open. He was aware, in the light which still held, that a man on horseback was at the side of the cut. He saw the man hold in his horse and raise his hand. The sound of the thunder had died, and it was now succeeded by the sound of a shot. McCart thought a bullet cut past him.

He knew somehow that the man on the horse was Rennie. Rennie had known that, with or without cattle, McCart would be returning this way at about this time. Rennie had deserted the job to which he had himself been assigned and had come down here to kill McCart. McCart was capable of a fine anger and that blazed up. His hand went to his gun.

But he did not draw the gun. Behind him there was a commotion. The thunder, the lightning, and then the sound of that shot had unnerved the cattle at last. They were crowding out of the cut. What they would do precisely no man could foretell. The lightning had died now, and McCart uttered a little prayer for its return. He wanted fervently to see. He wanted to see the cattle; but more, he wanted to see the man on the horse.

His prayer was answered. The lightning came, and now it was again that fanlike flare that illuminated everything. McCart had two instant impressions. One of these was of the cattle pressing toward him, spreading out a little. The other was of Rennie—he recognized him now—sitting his horse in a kind of helpless rigidity. McCart though he could guess what that rigidity resulted from. Rennie had tried to murder him and had failed. He had heard the noise of the crowding cattle. The lightning had half blinded him. He was not thinking quickly enough to decide, in this moment, what he should do.

McCart knew that he would have to get out of the way of the cattle—at once! They were stampeding now. They could easily run him down and trample him. Behind the cattle the two other men would be coming. McCart's job and theirs was to stay with the cattle and round them up. And yet McCart could not lose Rennie. The hour of his settlement with Rennie had arrived, and it would be such a settlement as Rennie's act called for. Either he or Rennie would remain behind here in the night.

But there was an increasing rush behind him. The cattle were coming out of the cut, and as they came they were spreading out. Their way, however, led straight at McCart. He could tell that by the thud of their hoofs. All this had taken but a fraction of a minute. McCart was thinking fast. He must stay with the cattle and yet he must keep Rennie with him. If he let Rennie return by the way he had come, he would disappear. As he had ridden along, he had doubtless picked out an avenue through the hills.

There was another flare of lightning, softer now but sufficiently illuminating, and McCart saw half a dozen head of cattle bearing down on Rennie as he sat his horse there to the left. McCart seized the opportunity as Rennie backed and then spun his horse.

"Ride, you fool," McCart shouted. "Thi way."

He darted out ahead of the cattle, and looking back, he saw Rennie turn his hors and follow him. Even in this dire momen McCart had to grin. Rennie had certain been taken off his feet by his failure to sho the man he hated and he had been furth taken off his feet by being recognized. H hadn't known what to do. If he had bee thinking intelligently, he would hav wheeled his horse and have darted awa

McCart wondered if he were bei touched by fear again! There must be lurking devil of fear in the man, a dev which rose in him and struck him into inaction and then laughed at him.

He was the more convinced of this when Rennie rode in toward him. Together, side by side, they galloped off across the flat, the cattle lumbering behind them. McCart began to debate what he should do. He ought to ride to one side and begin to try to turn the cattle, and yet there was a good deal of sport in this situation. Rennie, potential killer, seemed to think he was riding for his life. McCart did not think so. He thought his horse could outstrip those cattle if necessary or he could turn aside and eventually hold them.

In this, he recognized in a moment, he was wrong. The speed of the cattle was increasing. They seemed very close behind the horses in the darkness. McCart grew a little grim. Getting out of the van of them might be more of a job than he had thought. He could tell that they were well spread out now, and they had apparently gone wild.

HE OPENED his lips to shout to Rennie. If they were going to turn aside, they had better be about it. But he did not speak the words which were on his lips. Disaster came to Rennie with startling suddenness. One moment he was riding neck and neck with McCart. The next his horse stumbled, tried to catch himself, went down, and slid along on one shoulder. Rennie, probably because his mind was so full of other things, made no attempt to catch himself. He was hurtled over the horse's head. The horse scrambled to its feet and galloped away to one side.

McCart looked back. The dark mass of the cattle was bearing down on him like a living flood. Rennie lay on the ground, not stirring. McCart had no thought but to save the man. Rennie had tried, just now, to kill McCart, but that made no difference. Rennie was now in peril from sources with which he had nothing to do.

McCart had been carried past Rennie of course, but his horse had leaped no more than half a dozen times when McCart spun him about. He dashed back to Rennie and stopped. He almost thought he could hear the whistling of the breath of the cattle through their distended nostrils. He thought they would run him down before he could take Rennie up. But they were not so near as that.

McCart went over the side of his horse and clutched Rennie's clothing. By the exertion of a superb, untouched strength he lifted Rennie up before him. There was no question about the nearness of the cattle now. McCart struck his horse sharply and pulled him diagonally away from the cattle's path. A moment more and he and Rennie were free of them. They thundered by. As they went McCart saw dimly a man riding along them. His speed was greater than theirs. In the end he and the man who was undoubtedly on the other side of the cattle would succeed in turning them.

So McCart gave his attention to Rennie. Rennie lay across the horse in front of McCart. He was like a half-filled sack of grain as he lay there. He was so inert that McCart thought his neck might have been broken by his fall. Holding in his horse, McCart fumbled out matches. Lighting one, he lifted Rennie's head and let the light fall on his face.

To his great surprise he found that Rennie's eyes were wide open. They stared into McCart's eyes. Rennie's lips moved.

"What happened to me?" Rennie mumbled.

That was Rennie's way, all right! What had happened to *him?* He had no thought of what he had tried to do to McCart. He had no thought of those stampeding cattle. His only thought was of his own precious self.

In utter disgust young McCart straightened him up and let him drop to the ground. He was astonished to find that Rennie went down on all fours. Perhaps the man was hurt after all. He might have a broken leg.

McCart slid from the saddle and stood Rennie on his feet. The man was able to stand and that was about all. But his bones, McCart was sure, must be intact. He was only weak, McCart perceived; and then he further perceived that Rennie was trembling. No, it was more than trembling. It was a violent shaking all through Rennie's body.

McCart lighted another match and held it up to Rennie's face. The face was gray. The eyes protruded. The lips hung loose and flabby. Rennie was seeking to control himself, but he couldn't do it. He was as spineless in that moment as a column of jelly would have been.

"My Gawd, Rennie," McCart gasped, as the truth dawned on him, "you are scared! You are scared like I never seen a man scared before. What a hellish thing that fear of yours must be! You try to kill me, shoot me down in the dark. You would have left me there and never have cared whether I died right away or lingered a long time. You would never have cared if them cattle had trampled me to little pieces. But when *you* are in danger, it's diff'rent. Gawd, what a lot you must think of yourself!"

"You—you goin' to tell about this?" Rennie asked.

"Not me," McCart answered promptly. "I'd be ashamed."

And Rennie knew that he spoke the truth. Rennie got control of himself finally.

"I had a chill," he said.

McCart lighted another match and held it up. The color had come back to Rennie's face now. His eyes no longer popped. They were full of a sullen, sodden anger. Rennie was planning to kill the man who had rescued him.

McCart had a little touch of fear, then, but a fear far different from that which had swept Rennie. He was afraid he would have to kill this coward. It would be a devilish thing for a grown man to have to do.

Even as he stood there, McCart began to wonder whether there was not some other way out.

IV

RENNIE stood in front of the bar in a saloon in town, three days later. Twilight was here again, and the bartender had lighted the oil lamps. Rennie had been standing there for an hour, but he had not taken a drink. The bartender had asked him no questions, had, in fact, not even looked at him curiously. He was a bartender wise in his day and trade; for any man could have told that Rennie was on the warpath. He wore no coat. A gun sagged along his thigh. His vest was tightly buttoned.

Rennie was balanced between elation and disappointment. He had expected to meet McCart here tonight and to end their dispute. McCart hadn't come. Rennie, yellow though he was when he thought he might be hurt, was sure he could kill McCart, notwithstanding the manner in which McCart had once drawn his gun.

Rath had fired Rennie when Rennie and McCart had eventually come to the ranch-house, separately. McCart had had to explain about the stampeding cattle. He had meant to explain no more, but he couldn't fool an old hand like Rath. Rath had asked some pointed questions, had received a few evasive answers. Those answers had been enough.

Leaving the ranch, Rennie had faced McCart briefly. There was a sneer on Rennie's lips and an ugly look on his leathery face.

"I know what you are thinkin'," Rennie said. "You are thinkin' that because you picked me up when my horse stumbled you won't have to settle with me. You are just yella enough to feel that way about it. But a thing like that don't end a fight between real men. Hear me? *Real* men! I will be in Terry's saloon three nights from now. If you got any guts, come there, alone!"

And now Rennie was quite sure that McCart was not coming. He began to debate whether he should not start to drink. He had an accumulated thirst, and the money Rath had paid him was in his pocket. So long as there was a chance that McCart would come, he had refrained from drinking. He underestimated McCart, but not so much as to believe that he could best him when he was fuddled with drink.

Well, he would take a look outside, and then he reckoned he would wet his throat. He walked to the door and thrust it open. Three horses had just been ridden up to the hitching rack, and three men had just dismounted from them. Rennie stared. One of the men was Rath; the other two were men from the ranch. Had McCart turned his quarrel over to Rath? It would be an unheard of thing, but Rennie supposed it would be just like McCart.

He returned into the saloon and took his former place. Rath and the two punchers entered. They walked to the middle of the room and stopped. Rath stood looking at Rennie. Rennie did not like that look. He was afraid of Rath, and Rath appeared to have something on his mind. Half a dozen loungers along the wall came out of their somnolence, ready to witness a stirring scene or to slide to safety.

"I've ridden all the way down here to tell you somethin', Rennie," Rath said.

"Yeah?" said Rennie truculently.

"I have got a gun on me as you can see," Rath pursued, "but I don't think you want any of my medicine. Do you?"

"I ain't got no quarrel with you," Rennie replied.

"I didn't think you had," Rath retorted. "You are waitin' here for McCart. You think you could kill that boy. You never made a bigger mistake in your life. That boy is faster than you are. He is faster than me, and I can shade you, Rennie. You don't believe that? Shows what a numbskull you are. I have been noticin' gunmen for a good many years, here and there, and I can tell when it is natural for a man to handle a gun. McCart has got it on you."

"I don't see him showin' up here to prove it," Rennie said, a little uneasily.

"I asked McCart what happened out there in the storm," Rath went on patiently. "Couldn't get much out of him, but finally he told me he had never seen a man as scared as you was when he let you down off'n his horse. He said you was sick with fear, Rennie."

"He's a liar."

Rath's old eyes blazed. His slight figure drew together swiftly. His right hand, still without a suggestion of the stiffness of age in it, stirred expectantly. Rennie made no move. Only he swallowed slowly, with difficulty.

Rath laughed, relaxing.

"Rennie," he said, "that fear of yours is a hellish thing. McCart, boy though he is, guessed it. He said to me: 'Mr. Rath, I can't kill that fella unless I'm driven to it. If he keeps out of my way, I'll keep out of his. I can't stoop to kill a man as low as Rennie is. Furthermore, it would be a shame to do it. The fella must have pulled some awful dirty tricks in his time. He will pull more of them. But he is yella, Mr. Rath; clean through he is yella. He is forty years old or so. That fear in him is goin' to grow an' grow. It will punish him in the end far more than I could hope to punish him by killin' him. I will let him ride. His fear will get him. Before he dies he will be eatin' out of everybody's hand. He will be a grovelin' thing, Mr. Rath. The worst that I can do to that Rennie person is to let him keep on livin' and pay in the end. I'll let him keep on livin', Mr. Rath'."

The old man ceased speaking and stood looking calmly at Rennie. Rennie's uneasiness was a sort of shivery thing in him now. He moved from one foot to the other. The hand which lay along the bar rail tightened on it.

" 'I won't go to town for a month,' McCart told me," Rath continued " 'By that time Rennie will be gone.' You will be gone, won't you, Rennie?"

"No man can drive me out of any place I want to stay in," Rennie asserted.

Rath just stood and looked at him, a quizzical expression on his face. Rennie bore that look as long as he could. Then he turned to the bartender.

"Well, gimme a drink," he said savagely.

He filled a glass and tossed down the drink.

"Well, so long, Rennie," Rath called. "I'll see you in the sweet by and by."

He and the two punchers tramped out of the room. Rennie refilled his glass. The bartender said afterwards that he became the drunkest white man ever the bartender had seen. Rennie never heard that accusation. He was not in town, next day.

Part Three

The CIRCUS FLYERS

A Serial of Mystery and Grim Action in the Gallant World of the Big Tops

By

THOMSON BURTIS

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The Gavin-Garfield Circus was facing ruin. Some mysterious force, operating in the dark, and for unknown reasons, was doing its best to cripple the great show. An unprecedented number of accidents were happening. Animals died, equipment went bad, performers were injured. And the show was getting a bad reputation in the towns along its route. In some, even, it was not permitted to set up its big top. All of which presaged financial disaster. And to solve this mystery, and incidentally to earn money to develop a promising oil field which they owned, came George Groody and Tom Service.

They were no amateurs, either at sleuthing or the show business. Groody was an ex-Army air ace. And since the war he had done stunt flying for several circuses. Service was a crackerjack sleuth. He had made an enviable reputation for himself in the U. S. Secret Service. As a team, these two had cleaned up a criminal ring operating on another well-known circus.

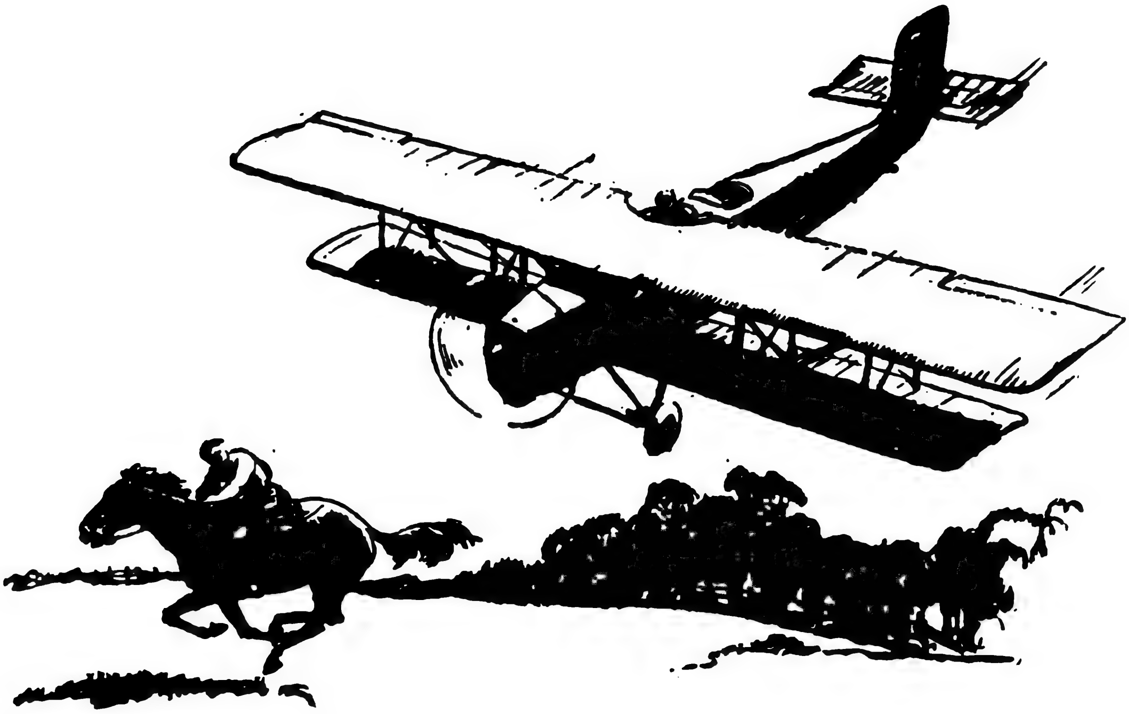
Musselman was the general manager of the Gavin-Garfield show, a shrewd business man sent to the lot to protect the interests of the majority owners. To him Groody presented his proposition. He and Service would get to the bottom of this mysterious conspiracy which was destroying the great show. They were both of proven reputations in that game. And, further, Groody would get two airplanes and do stunts to increase the waning interest in the show.
The price was high: $2,000 a day. High—y
Musselman thought it was worth it.

They concluded their bargain, the price to
kept a secret from the other bosses of the sho
Then Musselman introduced the pair aroun
Groody saw a lot that was wrong immediatel
The other bosses, old time show people, hat
Musselman. He was an outsider, and they r
sented his dominance; particularly, Jack Farre
manager and twenty-five per cent owner of t
show. And Groody found that he and Servi
were likely to be hated as Musselman men.

Groody witnessed some trouble that very fi
day. Musselman got into a scrap with Bro
O'Donnelly, the belligerent boss canvasma
O'Donnelly almost quit. And that would ha
seriously crippled the circus. But Jack Farr
intervened and the quarrel was patched up.

Next, an accident happened while the trape
artists were doing their dangerous stunts. O
of the swinging bars became loose and the st
jumper went plunging towards the sawdu
outside the safety zone of the net. Groo
jumped to the rescue and saved a life at the ri
of his own. This heroism made him frien
among the hostile troupers.

Another accident occurred that evening. T
knife thrower almost killed his wife, who act
as the target for his knives. The knives we
examined, and in half of them the blades h
been loosened. This made the knife throwe



aim uncertain. Someone had plotted deliberate murder. A negro boy was hanging around the tent. One of Musselman's detectives whisked him outside to question him about his suspicious actions. A shot rang out. The negro was dead. The detective said he had shot in self defense when the boy pulled a razor on him in the dark.

Groody then left the show to fetch the airplanes necessary for his act. He and Bob Corrigan, a friend and partner in the oil venture, flew the planes to the show lot. Service greeted them with more news of the terror. During Groody's absence, O'Donnelly and Musselman had been beaten by unknown assailants.

Groody had come to suspect Farrell. Acting on a hunch, he accused the manager of attempting to ruin the circus so that he could buy out the majority interest. This enraged Farrell and made him a dangerous enemy.

Young, nephew of Musselman, arrived to assist in the flying act. He impressed Groody unfavorably. A trial flight was arranged to test the new aviator. With Groody as passenger and observer, Young skilfully took his plane off the ground. After a few minutes' flying Groody was satisfied as to the other's ability and gave the signal to land. Then the motor stalled. Groody attempted to take control of the helpless ship. Young knocked him unconscious with a blow from a wrench. The plane crashed and was wrecked beyond repair. And it was Young who pulled Groody from the flames and saved his life. He apologized to Groody for his violence but insisted it was his right, as pilot, to land the ship. Groody was frankly puzzled and suspicious.

Hoping to trap Farrell, Groody and Service set one of the performers to watching him. Then Service left for Chicago to secure information from Federal agents.

During the subsequent evening performance a violent storm blew up. The canvas of the big top strained under the impact of the gale. The managers rushed the performance along. During a lull a loud voice rang out: "Run for it—she's coming down!" The panic-stricken crowd rushed for the exits. Pandemonium broke. And Groody saw a man rise up before the herd of elephants and toss something into the face of the leader. In terror she broke loose, and the whole herd followed her in mad stampede.

The alert Groody caught the ear of the lead elephant as she passed, and hung on for dear life. He hoped to stop the stampede but was whirled helplessly away into the night. Finally he dropped off safely, and as the herd rushed by he saw a horseman galloping after, egging the animals on with revolver shots.

Groody tore back to the show lot, to get his plane and follow the herd and that unknown horseman. As he was warming up the motor a performer approached and told Groody that Farrell had just thrashed one of Musselman's detectives and ordered the rest of them off the show. At last it was breaking!

CHAPTER XVI

ONE MAN DOWN

GROODY swung his plane around before it became necessary to answer questions. He stopped it a second, and beckoned Corrigan to the side of the ship.

"Remember—just spotting elephants!" he reminded the big airman, and Corrigan nodded.

He ran to the end of the field alongside the ship, helped turn it for the take-off, and released the wing as Groody, without allowing the ship to come to a dead stop, shoved the throttle all the way on. By this method he had the advantage of the speed of the turn, instead of getting into motion from a standing start. And on that soggy field, with the trees as a barrier at the lower end of it, two or three feet might mean just about all the difference in the world.

The low-powered Jenny drove heavily through the clinging earth. Groody, an unlighted cigar clamped in his mouth and his body hunched forward, got the nose down, and then sat still and prayed.

A hundred yards from the trees, and still the speed was less than seventy miles an hour as the tires sunk into the ground. With a jerk Groody pulled back the stick. The Jenny lumbered off the ground, then stalled back and bounced ever so little. Just enough to get the wheels out of the mud once more.

And Groody fought it with everything he had, in a desperate attempt to keep it in the air. For a second it slid along, inches above the soft earth. Then it dipped again, for lack of flying speed, but this time it scarcely touched. The trees were within thirty-five yards now, looming black and menacing.

There was no turning back. To cut the motor and give up would mean a head on crash into them. Groody, his mouth a thin line and lean cheeks showing deep-cut wrinkles, took a firmer grip on his cigar, and held the ship within inches of the ground.

With every yard it picked up speed. The trees rushed closer. At the last minute he took his gamble. The ship seemed to stand on its tail as he shot it upward in a mighty zoom. It did clear the trees, and the pilot jammed the stick forward before it stalled. There was a hundred yards of cleared land beyond the leafy barrier, and the Jenny dived down to it. That brought back his flying speed again, and as he skimmed across the ground in a gradual climb he knew he had won. Two circles for altitude, and he was off on the trail of the elephants.

Off to the north the sky was black, and faraway rumbles of thunder followed the continuous play of the lightning, but overhead the sky was clear after the cloudburst and a serene three-quarter moon rode high and placidly.

Groody was hunched forward in his seat, as though to help the ship on its way. Less than five hundred feet high, he roared along, climbing gradually because of the low rolling hills ahead. He cursed the loggy Jenny beneath him as he remembered the darting Nieuports of Issoudun, the S. E. 5's and Spads of the war days, the captured Fokkers and the M. B.'s of his later Army flying. With ships like those—even a De Haviland—one could do something. An aerial lumber wagon such as he was flying was as fitted for the possible emergencies ahead as a toothpick was for a weapon.

Down below he saw the round-up party toiling through the thin growth of trees. The elephants had kept a straight line in their gallop through the night.

Now he was over the crest of the hill. On ahead there seemed to be limitless cultivated fields, flat as a floor. Most of Ohio looked that way from the air, he remembered. The moon was bright, but not bright enough to enable him to see any great distance ahead.

He drove straight ahead. And in less than a minute he picked up the herd. They were rushing on, in single file, and he saw Tess take down a fence in her stride without losing so much as a heartbeat. The nearest house was a quarter of a mile away from the animals' line of march. Some people were emerging from it, looking toward him. He grinned sardonically as he thought:

"This is one time an airplane'll play second fiddle if they get a peek at those elephants!"

His narrowed gray eyes searched the ground for the rider as he came closer. He was in luck. There was a rider, on a white horse, galloping like mad across the adjacent field.

"Heard the plane, and decided his duty was done," Groody thought grimly. "Now, what's the next move?"

Even had he had guns, he could not have used them, of course. There was no charge against that fleeing rider to justify killing. Had there been, he would be of no use dead.

A wide road lay straight as a string, a quarter of a mile away, and apparently the rider was bound for that road. At the rate he was going, there was no possibility of his being captured by the showmen. Their first job was to round up the herd, in any event. Those beasts could do a hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage, in thickly settled sections, without turning a hair.

"This plane just scared him off too quick," Groody thought to himself. "It's the same bird all right, and while I don't know a hell of a lot about elephants, I know damn well he wasn't trying to stop 'em by shooting and screeching and beating 'em from behind."

He had to be stopped. He'd escape easily, otherwise. Groody himself didn't know what he looked like.

And right then Groody made up his mind. It was just a chance, but it might work. If he could be dismounted!

The Jenny was diving steeply for the horseman now, throttle all the way on and wires shrilling their song of blinding speed. A hundred yards back of the horse the plane was but a few feet from the ground, hurtling across the open field like a cannon ball. Straight for the rider he went, and the man, head turned to watch, did not slacken speed. The horse, maddened with fear, was running as few horses had ever run before.

And what Groody hoped would happen, did. The horse reared back on his haunches, then, in a paroxysm of fear, went to his hind legs as he whirled around. Just when it happened Groody could not say, exactly, but happen it did. The rider was pitched from his mount's back and the white horse was galloping madly across the field.

The rider lay still, nor did he move as Groody swept back and forth across the field, straining his eyes to discover whether a landing was possible. It was smooth enough, and large enough, but how soft was the cultivated ground?

He could not risk it, he decided, and turned his attention to the road. Luckily, not a car had passed along it for the past few minutes. Houses at some distance were alight, though, and Groody knew that there was many an eye on the plane, outlined clearly in the flaming plumes which swept from his exhaust pipes.

The road was wide enough, and he could see plainly that the wires were strung on poles which were set easily twenty-five feet from the ditches which bounded the highway.

At least a mile away, a single car came into sight, crawling along like a golden-eyed insect, so the flyer hurried. A last look to see that the man still lay there in the field, and he was easing his ship down over the road. He stalled it to the macadam, and then, for a few seconds which were packed with menacing possibilities, he used all his skill to keep it rolling straight. The danger period arrived when it had lost speed, and the controls were ineffective. As the plane's momentum dropped to almost nothing, Groody vaulted out of the cockpit, and in a second was at the tail, running with the ship. Twice he saved it from rolling into a ditch by lifting the tail and literally throwing the ship back on its course.

No sooner had it stopped than he was running ahead, waving his arms. The car stopped a full hundred yards from the Jenny, and three men and two women listened in amazement as Groody said tersely:

"I'm from the circus over at Jacobsen. The elephants got loose in the storm and I was spotting 'em. A circus man on horseback was on the ground, and got thrown when his horse got scared of the plane. He's over in the field now—hurt, I think, so I had to land. If he is, will you people drive him to the nearest doctor? And meanwhile see to it that no car runs into the ship?"

They would. In a moment Groody had found out that the nearest town was only five miles away, and that the doctor there occasionally used his house as a private hospital.

Two of the men accompanied him as he ran across the soggy field toward the unconscious rider. Somehow Groody had

had an instinctive feeling that the man was badly hurt, and he was right. His head had evidently struck a partially submerged stone. It was bleeding, and the man's breathing was barely discernible. Groody could not recognize his face, but that was not remarkable. He was a short, powerfully built man with a two-day growth of beard, a bald head, and a broken nose.

As they carried him to the car Groody debated whether to carry him back to the show in the ship or not. He decided not. In the first place, the man might need expert attention badly. The second argument against it was the necessity of avoiding any suspicion, on the part of certain members of the Gavin-Garfield Circus, that he had seen too much.

Groody quickly sized up his men. The driver of the car was a stout, bespectacled, ruddy faced man of fifty or so, with the appearance of a substantial business man.

When the wounded man had been safely ensconced in the back seat of the car, Groody drew the driver to one side.

"This is absolutely confidential," he said quickly. "In addition to being a flyer with the show, I'm a private detective also. We want this man. Will you make two things plain to the doctor? One, that the man's bill will be paid promptly. Two, that the doctor is to keep him safely in bed, at least for a few hours, until a man from the show, with proper credentials, arrives and remains as a guard. Now if you'll give me the doctor's name and telephone number, if possible, I'll call him up later and verify what you tell him."

The Ohioan, already in somewhat of a daze at finding an airplane in the middle of the road and a wounded man in his car, threw back his head and laughed a hilarious laugh.

"If this don't beat all!" he chuckled. "I feel like a kid! And they's elephants loose too, eh? Doggone! Sure, mister, I'll do all I can."

Against his wishes, but of necessity, Groody had to watch his captive driven away toward Ralston, Ohio.

He walked down the road, inspecting the space above it for any crosswires, and then came back and got into his ship. A moment later great bursts of flame from the choked motor were trailing behind him as the ship flashed down the smooth highway. He breathed a sigh of relief as he found himself well above the possibility of trouble, and then turned eastward, following the elephants.

FOR two or three minutes he could not pick them up. It was fortunate that the country was so thinly settled and that, so far, they had apparently damaged no more than one automobile and a few fences.

Suddenly he leaned forward, and strained his eyes. There they were, a mile ahead, but they were going the wrong way. They were coming toward him.

It did not take long for him to make certain of what he saw. There came back to him a story Tom Service had told that afternoon, having heard it from the boss elephant man. And Groody threw back his head and laughed.

Far down there was a string of eighteen elephants, Tess in the lead. From the positions of their trunks, each one, down to the smallest runt in the rear, was holding to the tail of the animal directly ahead. They were not running now, but shuffling along in slow, dignified cadence through the night.

Tess had come to herself. The stampede was over. And somehow Groody got the impression that those slow-moving mammoths were sheepish and ashamed as, in ludicrous parade, they followed the mother of the herd back home.

They were back-tracking on their own trail. The elephant men would meet them.

Fifteen minutes later Groody was feeling his way down to the field. Corrigan had prepared for his coming by setting a half dozen torches around the field. There were many other torches which Groody could see, too. They formed a trail, from the lot to the runs in the railroad yard, marking turns accurately, and between them, at intervals, the slow moving circus wagons could be seen, bound for the train.

Easily five hundred people who had been watching the tear-down rushed to the field to observe the landing. No sooner had Groody turned off the switches and got his feet on the ground than Musselman and Corrigan were alongside him.

"What's all this?" demanded Musselman, his dark eyes probing Groody's.

"When the elephants got loose I figured I'd save the show a lot of trouble by spotting 'em. Maybe turning 'em with the ship," Groody said carelessly.

"Shouldn't have done it," came Musselman's deep bass. "This ship is needed for its own work, to boost business. We can't take chances on cracking up any more."

He was inspecting Groody closely, as though wondering whether there was not more behind his action than appeared on the surface. He hesitated, as though to ask more questions, and Groody told him that the elephants were already on the way back. He did not mention the rider. That could come later.

"Coming back themselves, eh?" Musselman said with great relief. "Good. Well, see you later. Thanks, but you were foolish, Groody."

Groody's narrow eyes watched the stalwart G. M.'s departure with a curious light in them, and his mirthless smile was more one-sided than usual.

"What an actor *that* boy is," he said slowly.

"He missed his vocation," Corrigan agreed.

For the man who, with a mouse in his pocket, had stampeded the herd was Musselman.

CHAPTER XVII

SUSPICIONS

THEY did not dare leave the ship, because of the crowd. It was gradually disintegrating to continue inspection of the tear-down, but there were still people who would doubtless start climbing over the Jenny at the first opportunity.

Due to the slope of the field, Groody could get an excellent view of the herculean activity down on the muddy lot. The quarter poles of the big top were down, and the great expanse of canvas sagged between the four center poles and the hundreds of sidewall poles. He heard Bronk O'Donnelly's roar above the noise of the stakepuller and the shouting drivers.

"Poleriggers ready?" he roared. "Number One?"

"Yo!" came the shout in a hearty negro voice.

"Two?"

"Yo!"

"Three?"

"Yo!"

"Four?"

"Yo!"

"The poleriggers are standing beside each center pole," Corrigan told him. "I've been over talking to Bronk and watching him in action. Wait now."

Slowly the boss canvasman counted three. On the last count the great bailrings around each center pole, to which the canvas was attached, dropped swiftly down. Groody was to know later how dangerous was the job of the poleriggers and how many accidents could happen at the moment the canvas dropped. Now the big top was almost flat on the ground, and dozens of men swarmed over it as the poleriggers emerged through the bailrings. Other men were taking down and loading the sidewall poles, while the canvas sections were being unlaced and four gangs, each under the lash of an assistant boss's tongue, strove to outdue each other.

Close to the field a big wagon, loaded to the guards with quarter poles, was stuck in the mud. Two eight horse teams in front, one on each side of the pole, were straining their mightiest. One eight horse team was on each side, their tackle fastened to the sides of the wagon. Thirty-two giant grays, each eight with its own driver and all under the supervision of the mounted boss hostler, sprang into their harness as one at the word of command. And barely moved the wagon, a foot at a time.

"If the elephants were here, they'd be one or two pushing in the back," Corrigan told him.

Wagons were toiling about the lot in seemingly inextricable confusion. Four, six and eight horse teams, drivers carrying the whiffletrees behind their teams, were rushing here and there where extra horsepower was necessary. With the four gaunt center poles standing over all, and the searchlights turning the whole panorama into a curiously ghostly scene, five hundred men and more than a hundred horses worked like mad in mud to their shoetops. Without cessation, cutting through the earsplitting symphony of raw sound, came the voices of Bronk O'Donnelly and his four assistants.

Even Groody felt the drive of the thing. Soon it seemed that those hundreds of men were working with hysterical haste. The negroes, particularly, caught the spirit of it. They laughed nervously, put every atom of strength and skill into their tasks. When a man wanted instructions, he came on the run to his boss, gasped out his question, and ran back.

Now the canvas, unlaced into sections, was being rolled. The stakes were being loaded. Men were gathering at the center-pole guys preparing to let them down. A dozen wagons inched into place for loading.

And here, there, everywhere, dominating that epic of organized labor, was Bronk O'Donnelly. He directed the wagons, spurred on each gang individually, picked out one man for praise or blame, held the whole undertaking in the hollow of his hand. And without cessation his thunderous voice reverberated over the field. The best boss canvasman in America was getting his show off a muddy lot.

"Before I leave this show I'm going to learn how they run it," Groody stated as his unusually bright eyes roved ceaselessly over the scene.

"Providing there's any show left," suggested Corrigan. "But it looks as though we were on our way, doesn't it?"

"Sure does. And we might as well crack our heads together, so to speak, before we get in touch with Tom."

"Well, you're sure it was Musselman who made certain that there'd be a stampede?"

"Absolutely. And, I imagine, one of his men shouted that stuff in the tent to cause a panic. Many hurt, by the way?"

"Nobody killed. A few seriously hurt with broken bones. In general, everything luckier than you'd expect. Mr. Mettall is probably touring now, trying to pay off the injured."

"Sure. Well, my idea is this. While I know what I saw, it may not be any too certain evidence in a court. Musselman, I imagine, had had stampeding the herd in mind for some time. The storm gave him an excellent opportunity. All the elephant men were fighting off the mob. He just showed Tess that mouse in a split second, and then let it jump, under cover of the confusion. If I wasn't so tall, I couldn't have been so sure. And, of course everybody knows an elephant is scared to death of a mouse."

"Uh-huh. They tell me it's because the mouse'll run up the trunk every time, and when the elephant tries to blow it out it digs in with its claws, and gangrene is inevitable. Any small thing that comes suddenly'll scare an elephant."

"Musselman was all set with his mouse. Funny thing, at that. Probably had it all trapped and ready for days.

"Well, here's the idea. We know now that Musselman is the head of the plot to make a two-spot out of this show. But we've got to prove it, and catch his confederates, and in general nail the whole thing right to the cross. Which can't be done by my saying that I saw him with a mouse in his hand."

"It brings on a lot of talk," nodded Corrigan.

"Sure does. The first question is: Why has he got a grudge against the show? My idea is that he played a keen card when he said that Farrell was doing it in order to buy the show cheap. I think that's what Musselman—or his employers—may be up to. Or else he's had such a fight with his father-in-law that he's doing it just for spite. That doesn't seem reasonable, although a combination of the two things does.

"It explains a lot of things. Suppose we say that a bunch of unscrupulous showmen, like former owners of crooked carnivals, or other scum of the business like that, for several reasons wanted to buy this old established show cheap. They got together with Musselman, or something. However the plot was hatched, they plant men with the show at the start of the season, send some grifters along on the side, and start raising hell.

"Incidentally, some practical showman with a large criminal acquaintance has his hand in the pie. And I found out with that Levin-Willet carnival that a bunch of cheap outdoor show people, from medicine men to concessionaires, aren't above pulling a lot of raw stuff."

"Well, they start wrecking the show from the inside—" Corrigan reminded him.

GROODY lit a cigar before resuming. "Then Musselman, being at headquarters, fixes it so he's sent on to fix the show up. And he makes it worse, under the guise of trying to help it. If he told the truth about his father-in-law, he's a man of big affairs and probably would be willing to shuck the show cheap to get rid of it after it had gone to hell, in preference to bothering with it."

"It sure does explain a lot of things," Corrigan said thoughtfully. He ran his big hand through his coarse black hair, slowly.

"In the first place," he went on, "it means that these detectives of his are crooked, and are probably helping in the sabotage themselves."

"Absolutely. With the help of a few other men scattered through the show."

"And that brings on more talk about the demise of one Hiram nigger," Groody said oratorically. "Know what I think? I think that dick fiddled with those knives himself. And that Hi saw Hatwell doing it—or at least was in the neighborhood. The coon was sort of in bad, and he came in that storeroom to tell Pop MacDonald what he'd seen—not knowing that Hatwell was a cop, of course.

"Then Hatwell thinks fast, bowls the darky off his feet, runs him out of the tent, and shoots him in cold blood to keep his mouth shut!"

"God Almighty!"

"Tom said there was a little coon girl in that minstrel show that was Hi's newest sweetheart, and that she was down in the mouth and might have an idea or so in her head. We'll interview said actress, and see what we can coax out of her."

"Sure. But it looks like a leadpipe cinch, whether she knows anything or not. And it means that our friend Young is in on the scheme, too, doesn't it?"

"Sure. But here's something to remember, Bob. It's almost an impossibility that Musselman, as long as he doesn't know that we are wise to him, should want to get rid of us. He hired us, at an outlandish price, for two reasons. One was to keep up his bluff of helping the show by every means possible. The other was to have an excuse to spend a lot more money to help put the show on the rocks."

Corrigan smote one trunklike thigh with his hand.

"Right as rain," he proclaimed. "And from what you said, it accounts for a lot of generosity. That Wardell business you spoke about, now. He almost urged his best feature act to leave the show—and draw money while it was laying off! And he's willing to pay us that wad of money, when we only have one ship, and he's buying the other one himself."

Groody's hawklike face relaxed in a grin.

"And this Young business," he suggested. "Young wanted to crack up that ship of ours, to make us less of an attraction and to cause more expense. He's got nerve, and did it. Then, after the wreck while I was unconscious from his own blow, he sawed that feedline, and set the fire, and saved me, supposedly. I do think it worked out into a harder task than he'd figured.

"But the idea of that was simple. It was to get Young thoroughly in right with us—one of the gang. They'd figured we'd talk to him as we did between ourselves. He'd be one of the operatives, as it were, as well as one of the flyers. And thereby, Bobby my boy, Mr. Musselman would know in a second when, if, and how we stumbled on any real information. See? Ain't it be-yoo-tee-ful?"

"And that business of having himself beaten up slightly, while the thugs he'd hired to do it were trying to put O'Donnelly hors de combat—that was the last clincher to divert any possible suspicion away from him!" Corrigan put in.

He shook his shaggy head, and that curiously charming grin changed his dark, rugged face into an eager boyishness which explained why an artist was an adventurer, too.

"It's—it's immaculate," he stated. "Maybe Young'll crack the ship on his trip back, just for an excuse to buy another one."

"Their method will be to crab our stunts as much as possible, in case they should help business," Groody pointed out. "And we might catch a couple of small minnows by being prepared for that very thing."

"Uh-huh. Well, what to do, George, what to do?"

"Well, my idea is this. We've got to lay low and spread our net to round up the whole bunch of fish. First, give Musselman absolutely no grounds for dreaming that we know anything. In fact, appear to him as though we were more and more certain it is Jack Farrell. Tom, of course, will do everything possible in Chicago—with the aid of the thousand or so friends he has in the Government service—to get all the dope up there. We'll phone him right away. With the leads we give him, he'll come back with a fistful of circumstantial evidence.

"Then I think he ought to go to Hinton. Musselman was supposed to have everything in Hinton fixed for a showdown. Knows the chief and all that stuff. Former home or something. I think there's more than a chance that a blow-off is scheduled for there, but maybe not the kind Musselman indicated. It won't be a round-up of crooks—it'll be the last knock-out blow to the show. See? It's a chance, anyway.

"As it stands we've got three fake or crooked detectives, and Musselman, and that bird in the hospital at Ralston. Which reminds me that I must tell Musselman about that, so that he won't think I'm holding back on him and get suspicious."

"Right you are. We don't want to do any flying if someone's out to get us, don't forget that."

"Believe me, I'm not. I'll tend to it right away. Just make him think that it was an isolated horseman, that I don't know whether he was a showman trying to stop the elephants or a local man who just happened to be riding around. He just got thrown. Unimportant and all that stuff.

"Well, going on, we've got Young also. They make a good start. All we've got to do is catch the gang with the goods. We can afford to wait a few days on that chance before trying to crack down on the dicks or someone else and forcing a confession without much evidence. We'll get Farrell and the bosses together, and everyone else who can be trusted and has some brains and authority, and the entire show, practically, will just be watching and waiting and ready, while Musselman and his thugs go innocently on.

"And don't forget this important personal point, either. We can make a lot of money on this flying circus stuff, and we want our jobs. If we crash through with a loud explosion, seems to me this owner up in Chi ought to keep us on for a few weeks, anyway, at a reasonable salary. Partly, maybe out of gratitude. That's to start. But I'm damned if I don't think it a good business proposition for any show big enough to handle it.

"By that means, we can fix up this oil-field stuff, and have a good time as well. So we want to make a record for ourselves.

"Besides that, I'm damned if this circus stuff isn't getting into my blood. I want to be around it a while for my personal—er—delectation."

"Me, too," grunted Corrigan. "How about seeing Musselman?"

"Right now."

GROODY picked his way across the lot. The wet canvas, rolled into huge round bales, was being loaded on the canvas wagons. A system of two endless ropes, working on pulleys at the front end of each wagon, allowed a team of horses, pulling in the opposite direction from that in which the canvas was moved, to load the huge rolls efficiently. All around the lot stranded wagons were waiting for enough horses to move them. The noise was split by a Gargantuan roar from Bronk O'Donnelly, and the first of the great center poles, all attached by guys to the other poles, came crashing to the ground.

Musselman was standing near the light wagons. Near him was Jack Farrell, his cool gray eyes glancing continuously over the familiar panorama before him. The lot superintendent was near by, and Bullion, the assistant manager, was telling the sideshow boss what he thought of him for having forgotten to load one pole on the sideshow wagon.

At Groody's request Musselman accompanied him to a sheltered spot behind the light wagons.

"Just wanted to tell you that we're pretty sure the job will be done in a day or two," Groody said casually.

"What?" barked Musselman. "What job?"

"The job we were hired for," stated the flyer easily. "I won't spread our hand yet, until we're sure. But I'll just say one thing. Don't be surprised if I hang around Jack Farrell quite a lot."

Musselman's prominent dark eyes probed the glinting gray ones in front of him for a long ten seconds.

"Hear what he tried to do tonight?" the general manager said suddenly.

"I don't believe so. What?"

"Pretty nearly beat a detective to death, and told all three of 'em to get off the show. But I took a hand—and Farrell's leaving the show tomorrow!"

Groody mentally congratulated himself on the fortunate thought which had appealed to him as an excellent blind trail whereon to steer Musselman. It was now utterly natural for him to say hurriedly:

"He can't leave the show, Mr. Musselman! Hold him on it if you've got to go on your knees to him! How can we nail him to the cross unless he's around?"

"You think you can do that little thing?"

Somehow Musselman's gaze was disturbing.

"It's a cinch, almost. We haven't been idle. Keep Farrell with the show, and we'll turn circumstantial evidence into legal proof within a week, I promise. We've got to have him here, where he can be watched, and where we can lay our hands on him."

Musselman hesitated. Groody, standing with slightly bent knees, watched his amazing employer with a sort of hard amusement in his eyes. His mind went back to that night in the railroad station when Musselman had talked like a lonely, bitter, straight-shooting man battling fiercely against heavy odds. "How he took me in!" Groody admitted frankly, and with respect. "He got good training before he ever quit the stage!"

"I'll do my best to hold him," Musselman said finally. "You haven't tipped your hand, and I hate to ask——"

"And I won't tell until we've got something more tangible to show you," Groody interjected. "But I'd like to bet a week's salary against ten thousand berries that we're on the trail. Suppose you go to Farrell right away, before I tackle him, and persuade him to stay. Apologize, and all that. Then I'm going to start working on him. As I say, don't be surprised at anything."

"I won't," Musselman said absently, his eyes never leaving Groody. "By the way, Groody, I want to repeat what I said earlier. It was very foolish of you to do what you did tonight. Not only the flying, but taking a chance hanging onto Tess. You've got to remember your job isn't handling animals, and we don't want you hurt. Incidentally, how did you happen to be so close to old Tess? I was near by, and I didn't notice you."

Groody felt a certain little train of shivers chasing themselves up his back. There in the darkness, with the din of the tear-down ringing in his ears and a thousand unseen possibilities impregnating the air, it seemed to him that Musselman's mind was working along menacing paths.

"Just happened to be there during the excitement," he said carelessly. "Elephants had been acting up, you know, and God knows the cats were raising hell! I didn't notice you.

"Oh, by the way. I don't believe it was a circus man, but it might have been. Anyway, when I was flying after the elephants there was a man on horseback trying to round 'em up on the ground. His horse got scared at the plane, and threw him. I found a place to land when he didn't get up, and went to see how he was. He wasn't hurt much; just stunned, people thought. Anyhow, I got a car to take him to a hospital in Ralston. I didn't recognize him, but it might have been a showman. Do you want to send a man over to see about him, or anything?"

Musselman nodded.

"I'll attend to it," he said rapidly. "Don't mention it around; might get you in bad with the fellow's friends, if he is a showman. All right, I'll go see Farrell right now, and then get a man on his way over there."

"I'll stick around and see Farrell as soon as you're through," Groody returned. "So long, and don't be surprised if you see me doing peculiar things from now on."

He stalked away into the darkness, with a queer feeling in the back of his head. He was certain that Musselman was looking after him with a great deal of speculation in those turbulent brown eyes. However, the flyer, walking with great deliberation, refused to turn around and thought comfortably:

"It'll be right interesting to see who Musselman sends to Ralston. I'll get Bob busy right now and find a man Bronk can recommend to watch Musselman's man, so to speak, and whoever this elephant chap is at the same time.

"Musselman sure is doing a lot of thinking, looks like. But as long as he's not thinking too much about me, it's all right."

He was correct. Had Musselman not been thinking too much about Groody, everything would have been all right.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHOWMEN ALL

GROODY took less than five minutes to set Corrigan on his mission, and returned to loiter around the light wagon with the lot superintendent, twenty-five feet away from the spot where Farrell and Musselman were having a low voiced but apparently unfriendly conversation. Curly Sims, the lot man, was somewhat wrought up. His wife, who led the Hawaiian number in the musical comedy afterpiece of the show, had barely escaped serious injury during the riot, and Curly, never a placid individual, treated Groody to a comprehensive lexicon of profanity which included certain words and phrases entirely new to the flyer, who was by way of being an expert in the subject himself. Having treated the show business in general, he descended to the Gavin-Garfield show in particular, reaching heights of blasphemy which left Groody gaping in awe.

Curly broke off suddenly and darted away. Mr. Blacker'n Hell Cody, a gentleman of color, was trying to sneak off the lot to the train without helping to load the center poles. Curly, a small, wiry package of dynamite, had barely started on Blacker'n Hell when Bronk O'Donnelly rushed by. Bronk cuffed Blacker'n Hell playfully, and the huge darky fell. He got up running, and was one of more than twenty other men lifting the second pole within ten seconds.

When Curly returned to his post of duty Groody inquired casually:

"This town Hinton that's on the route—ever play there before, Curly?"

"Yeah. Not with this outfit. Showed there with the Sells-Floto in '19. Lot's quite a ways from town. Good business, but tough crowd."

"How so?"

"Three-quarters coal miners. Old folks can't talk English and the young 'uns think they're tough. Sprinklin' o' West Virginia mountaineers. It ain't in Ohio, yuh know, and it's in the mountains. But it's good business, and it's a matter o' holdin' 'em down, that's all."

Groody nodded thoughtfully. Before he could speak, Musselman had walked way from Farrell, toward the edge of the lot. Groody slopped through the mud toward the manager. As he started to hail him there came wild shouts and curses from the pole wagon, now loaded with the center poles. For a few seconds it seemed that the entire force of men were shouting to High Heaven.

The fact was that with no less than twenty-four horses in front and sixteen more on the sides, they had pulled the pole right out of the wagon in an endeavor to start the heavy load.

Bronk O'Donnelly and the boss hostler were on the job, however, and Farrell's advice was not needed, so Groody tapped him on the shoulder.

"Let's get back out of this racket," he suggested. "I've got something of importance to say. In fact, that what's ailing this show is now plain as the nose on my face, which is plain enough, and that we've got the head of the scheme right where we want him."

The cool, granite-hard manager's light eyes bored into Groody's. In softly conversational tones he said:

"Am I being arrested?"

"No. You're being apologized to," Groody told him, their eyes holding steadily. "We got a tip on you: you were a man with a motive, a practical showman, and, to put it bluntly, some of your actions were of the kind that didn't make it a cinch that you were doing your best for the show. However, that's over. I got the dope tonight, and here it is."

Talking low and fast, Groody told his story and outlined the tentative plans laid by himself and Corrigan. Farrell, motionless and silent, listened while his eyes absently probed the darkness. Only occasionally did they shift to Groody. Not once did he interrupt.

"What we think are the strong points of the scheme are several," Groody concluded. "In the first place, it's a chance for practically a complete round-up. In the next place, that means several things besides clapping the gang in jail. If you agree that it's probable that Musselman and his backers, or Musselman alone, want to get this show for about what the damage suits against it amount to, and operate it, why you've got to figure that there's at least several dollars of capital hanging around. And when we get 'em, there's nothing to prevent getting all the money they've got, by hook or crook, for damages. That means something. It's all right to have a show that isn't being picked on back in your own hands and with only ordinary disadvantages to overcome, but that won't bring back the hundred thousand dollars or so you've lost, one way or the other.

"What say?"

The manager's eyes were suddenly luminous, and for a long moment they held Groody's. It was as though the silken-voiced, repressed showman was finding out new things about the man before him with every passing second.

And Groody was conscious of the fact that a sort of weight had been removed from his mind. With every passing day his respect for the man before him had grown. The steel beneath the velvet had been unmistakable, and the stories which had been passed from lip to lip about him had increased the stature of Jack Farrell steadily. What he had done, single-handed, against three bootleggers slipping on the lot in Port Huron; the epic battle with four tough hoboes, far down the train in the yards on a stormy night; above all, his battle from a ragged carnival hanger-on up through connection man and big top boss to manager and part owner of the second largest circus in the world. Groody knew enough of the outdoor show business, as it was, and had heard so much about what it had been back in the old days when a show was a traveling army with some of the scum of the earth as privates therein, to realize dimly the manner of man it took to succeed in it.

That meant the physical man as well as the mental—and it took iron in the soul to succeed.

"Groody," Farrell said slowly, "there's little to say. You've said it all. And by God, I'm a man instead of a maniac, and I can apologize."

"Thanks. That's mutual."

Farrell was a new man, for the moment. He was, almost, excited.

"I've had a hunch for weeks that Musselman wasn't right," he said happily.

Then he straightened, as though ashamed of the genial humanness he had showed for a moment, and his voice was suddenly crisp and cool.

"Now let's get down to brass tacks," he said incisively. And for ten minutes they did.

They had scarcely finished when Corrigan reported that Bullion's brother, who was in the band, was on the job, and that he was bound for Ralston by hired automobile.

"He'll keep under cover, is thoroughly reliable, and whoever Musselman sends over there from the show young Bullion'll know," he finished. "What's the lay, George?"

"Musselman thinks we have Farrell spotted," Groody told him. "He acted a bit peculiar, but nothing to worry about. Farrell says the matinée tomorrow at Youngsville will have to be canceled. We'll be lucky to leave town at dawn and it's a long jump. That means the night show is bound to be big, and there's no need of our putting on a flying show tomorrow afternoon or night. You fly the ship over. I'm going on the train, and we'll get everything under way. I'll call Tom now. We can't hold any conferences, as it were, until the show's down."

"Good," stated Corrigan. "Then I'm going to sleep right now under a wing. See you tomorrow. If you get a chance, stick an arrow or something in a field you've looked over, eh? This rain makes fields tricky. Adios."

GROODY, at Farrell's suggestion, climbed up on the seat of a plank wagon which had got off the lot, and rode down town between the flaring torches which showed the way. The weazened little driver, his gnarled fingers widely separated over the lines which controlled his eight horse team, discoursed proudly concerning his team. Rumbling along through the quiet night, Groody had his first real impression of the spirit which kept the motto ever green—"Once a showman always a showman." That teamster was an illustration of it. Groody, later on, was to know more about those master horsemen—how the slightest scanting of their teams' feed turned them into truculent kickers who'd leave the show if their horses didn't get their full share; who stole hay daily from the elephants and each other in order to treat their teams at the cars when the night's work was done; who believed implicitly that their teams were the best in the world.

The ghostly parade of vehicles had to stop to let a railroad train go by.

"Why are your leaders turning around so much?" queried Groody. "They seem nervous. Those middle horses, too,"

"That off horse in the second team is new, and they want t' look him over," chuckled the driver. "It ain't always a horse'll work into a team. These here wheelers, now, when I got the nigh one the rest o' the team pretty near bit him tuh death because he wasn't much of a worker first.

"But that there new one, Bessie, she'll be all right. I heard about her from a farmer when we showed Kensington, Indiana, a month ago. I tried tuh git the boss t' go over 'n' look at her, but he wouldn't, so I goes myself, and makes Jack Farrell buy her. One I had was gettin' too old. I bought her off the show and shipped her to a farm I got.

"Now watch these here wheelers—see 'em pull? And old Tom there, that was near bit tuh death when he come, see him givin' that new hoss hell?"

Under the spell of the old teamster's talk it seemed to Groody, rocking along high above the sleek grays before him, that each horse turned into an individual personality. For each of them the driver had a story, and all were good.

"Stop at this drug store," Groody told him. "And say, when I get time I'm going to ride around a little with you and watch you handle 'em, eh?"

"Shore. We'll put a plug hat and a red coat on yuh and yuh can be brakeman on parade," chuckled the driver. "Yo!"

The leaders, trained to answer their master's voice in the bedlam of the teardown—one of the things which makes a good lead pair—led the team on its way, and Groody settled down in a telephone booth.

When he got Mr. Thomas Service on the wire he proceeded to talk exactly twenty-two dollars and eighty cents' worth. The druggist's clerk had to O. K. the call, and be paid direct. But when the flyer finished, Tom's voice floated gently over the wire:

"Good night. We're too damn good for this business. Too fast to hold a good job!"

Groody walked the rest of the way to the runs, and for a time stood around and watched the loading. The razorbacks were hard at it, now, for loading and unloading times were their hours of furious labor. Loading teams, at the end of ropes and chains dozens of yards long, trundled the wagons up the runs and into their familiar places on the flats. The cages were all in place, and before long the elephants arrived and docilely allowed themselves to be wedged into the elephant car. The ringstock were already in for the night, but there could be no rest for the hundred and twenty baggage stock until the last wagon was off that muddy lot.

There were a few loafers and enthusiasts still up, watching the loading, but the performers were all in bed. Farrell would rout out Ed Wardell and others when the time came. Groody strolled down to the privilege car, lodged in the center of the long line of white Pullmans. There, over a cup of coffee and a piece of pie, he listened to the Barclay brothers talk, and waited for his men.

A lunch counter split the privilege car for half its length, and in the small space behind it a most ungodly variety of food and drink could be served. The lower half of the car was given over to various card tables, slot machines, and other paraphernalia for the delectation of the show. The Barclay brothers ran the games for the show, in addition to their duties as ticket takers on the big top and sideshow, respectively. Lean, tanned, genial veterans, they regaled Groody with tales which kept his eyelids from closing or his interest from flagging. Occasionally a muddy, weary, sweating man would stumble in, gulp coffee and sinkers, and lurch off to bed, and from the flats came the unceasing rumble of the loading.

It was an hour past dawn when the final truck reached the train. Canvasmen and others had to walk to the train, wherever it might be from the lot, but the bosses, last off the ground, rode down in a small truck. With Bronk O'Donnelly in the lead, they stamped in. Unshaven, and muck from head to toe, their clothes torn and disheveled, they were as rough a looking crew as ever trouped through a nightmare.

"We'll order your coffee, Doris," boomed O'Donnelly. "Go git Ed Wardell, Hodgkins, George Byers and Fred Mygatt. Then make sure Musselman and Farrell are both in their bunks."

"Why Farrell?" inquired Groody.

"He said he wasn't comin' in on it, for

some reason, and he didn't say what was up."

GROODY thought he knew why Farrell did not want to join in the gathering. His stateroom was next to Musselman's. Musselman was supposed to know nothing of the meeting in the pie car, and Farrell, if necessary, would see to it that said supposition was carried out.

"Well, Loot," grinned O'Donnelly as the boss elephant man came in wearily, "you sure saved Reeves a lot o' trouble tuhnight!"

"I'll say so," assented the elephant man. "He slowed up the stampede, hanging to Tess thataway. Remember when Red McKay did the same thing, Corpy? He rode old Dote by the ear. All of a sudden he saw that Dote was making dead for a garage across from the lot. Red couldn't swing loose—whole herd behind him, so he curls up under Dote's trunk as the bull rammed right through the walls. Still hanging to his ear, Red was, and he got a terrible hand. We were showing Davenport, Iowa, and he was in the hospital there for weeks."

"And was Dote a bad bull!" stated young Jack Moorhead soulfully. "God!"

"Why would a show keep a bad one?" inquired Groody.

"They all—the bulls—get bad spells when they get a certain age and start looking around for some flapper elephant," grinned Reeves. "Some get over it, some don't. Dote didn't, and it cost this show about twenty thousand bucks to find it out."

"That there time with Dote was the damnedest two days I ever see," stated old Corpy after a copious inhalation of coffee. "Loot, we was showin' Gerbersburg, Louisiana. All of a sudden old Dote goes completely nuts, right after the matinée. He goes all over the lot, tippin' over wagons and raisin' hell. Nobody could stop him, and everybody took to cover.

"Then he goes smashin' through the sidewall of the big top, and goes to the platform between one and two rings, and does the same act he done in the show.

"By this time Jack Farrell had made up his mind, and he and Reeves here and Bronk and me and Pop MacDonald go up to a hardware store and git a mess o' the highest powered rifles we could. When we got back to the lot old Dote was still goin' strong.

"Well, sir, in an hour every gun in town was on the lot, and we was layin' under wagons and wreckage snipin' at him. He must o' had two hundred slugs in him, but we couldn't kill him and he was tryin' to kill us. He tips over the cat cages and they're raisin' hell.

"Finally he beats it off, thirteen miles into a swamp. The people around was wild. The show had to stay there two days, and hunt that damn bull. We finally got him, in a swamp, and we give the hide to the farmers as a souvenir. Weighed thirty-five hundred pounds. Git that—thirty-five hundred. Jack Farrell was so nervous for a couple o' days he was just shakin'. Just dumb luck Dote never killed anybody. He was a killer, that day—just nuts."

"Fine combination tonight," Groody remarked, as Pop MacDonald wandered in.

The old man's foxy, white mustached face was as eager as a boy's.

"Some lot," Groody went on, "and some storm."

"Hell, that lot wasn't nothin'," Black Top Mike said spaciously. "Get on a lot of Texas gumbo mud after two weeks rain. I've seen four eights and six sixes—teams I mean—on one wagon with two bulls pushin' behind."

"Remember that lot in Cascaloosa, Nevada?" chuckled O'Donnelly. "That was a lot. And a storm. A whippet, it was—come quick, like a twister. Lifted the whole damn cooktent up in the air and carried it four mile, and never moved a table!"

"Them whippets is funny," agreed Black Top Mike, soaking his doughnut in his coffee. "I seen one hit the Big Show in Granger, Texas, and carry away the big top without pullin' a stake,* by God! Just snapped the ropes, come so quick. The Number Four center pole was layin' on top of the menagerie tent. Never touched the cat house at all!"

DAD METTALL came in, followed by the other performers, rubbing their sleepy eyes. The Barclays were considered to be trustworthy, as was Lowdown Red, behind the counter. The kinkers weren't awake yet, but the bosses, who should have been dead on their feet, were as alert as though a good night's sleep was behind them.

All bent friendly, interested eyes on Groody. Several had thrown him facetious remarks which masked respect and admiration. And old Dad Mettall had said kindly:

"You were born to be a showman, Groody."

And for some curious reason the hard-bitten Groody felt an unaccustomed warmth within him. These straightforward, outspoken adventurers breathed a sincerity in every action and word which was untainted with hypocrisy in any form. And he appreciated their respect more than that of most other people in the world. It was a real kick to him to say simply:

"Gentlemen, we've found the man we're after. It's Musselman."

Bedlam broke loose. When he had attained quiet, the train was on the move, and as it swayed over the tracks he told the familiar story again.

"Now here's the dope," he went on. "For various reasons, the most important being the physical impossibility of showmen keeping their eyes peeled twenty-four hours a day, Mr. Service is sending the best detectives he can find in Chicago to join the show. Bronk, you'll hire 'em and put 'em to work where they can watch the Musselman men, who are certainly mixed up in the business. Hatwell just croaked that coon because the coon had seen Hatwell around those knives, I'm sure. When Tom's through investigating in Chicago, he'll hop into Hinton with help and look things over for the climax we're sure is coming.

"Mr. Mettall, on any excuse you think best, such as a damage case coming up in some town back on the route, you leave the show, go over our trail, and see what you can horse out of some of the phoniest looking suits along the lines we mentioned.

"Mr. Farrell is sure of the show's twenty-four hour man, and the two contractors on ahead. They'll be primed by him. The crux of the whole matter, I think, will be found in Hinton. That is, the blow-off'll come there."

"And a damn good place," Fred Mygatt, the equestrian director, put in excitedly. "You know, Bronk. The Pelter outfit had a big clem there last year, and Sells-Floto had hell another year. Some tough boys around there. Lieutenant," he explained to Groody, "it's one o' these towns like a bunch of 'em, 'specially college towns, used to be. Circus fair game. Only these boys are tougher if they git started.

"What I mean is that the show's got somethin' to worry about there, regardless o' Musselman."

"There may be nothing," Groody pointed out. "But Musselman mentioned it. And it's supposed to be the town where the chief and everybody cooperates in rounding up some of the grifters who've been barnacles on the show, see? Maybe we're wrong, but it's only sensible to make preparations.

"There's a lot of things to think of, but one of the first ones is for every boss here to set down the names of the men he'd sink or swim by—not a man who could be suspected in the bunch, get me? We've got to get ourselves an army ready, in case of necessity, so let's go."

They did. The capitulation of the executive staff of the Gavin-Garfield Circus to Groody was unanimous and without reservation. As excited as boys, they alternated between bloodcurdling curses on the heads of Musselman and his crew and tingling excitement at what might lie ahead.

Finally, at ten in the morning, bed was in order. Arrival at the next stand, according to the boss of the razorbacks, would be at about five o'clock—which meant that a considerable section of hell would be in evidence around the lot before the doors opened.

Groody, reeling with fatigue, went over and over his plans, mentally, and with Bronk and the rest discussed, more than once, detailed plans of procedure. The aim was to turn the reliable employees of the show, down to the last man, into a skeleton army. The bosses, now that the chilling dread of the unknown had turned into leaping anticipation of a contest with known forces, were tireless. Pop MacDonald, forty years a showman and more than seventy years old, was like a bright eyed, ageless old elf. He and Dad Mettall had heated arguments about great clems of the old days, until Bronk O'Donnelly shut them up with a loud:

"I'm gonna lay down an' scratch a while. They's work ahead this day, for everybody. Lieutenant, where yuh floppin'?"

"Anywhere."

"Take my advice. I'll shake yuh down a tarpaulin on a flat car. Yuh don't want tuh double up in one o' these berths. C'mon—hurry it up!"

Groody walked down the line of sleepers. Each berth, upper and lower, was occupied by two people. In the stag cars curtains were unknown, night clothing unheard of, and no circus man got anything but a bucket bath except on Sunday.

As they emerged from the Pullmans to the first flat car Groody said, half to himself:

"I presume Dad Mettall will handle that stuff in those towns we've played all right——"

"Say, listen!" O'Donnelly told him bluffly. "Dad's been a showman for nearly fifty years, and a legal adjuster for twenty. There isn't a slicker article this far north. Why, damn it, he legal-adjusted a show all over Europe, and he couldn't speak a word of the lingo!

"There ain't a faster thinkin' man livin', nor a slicker article. One time we was showin' Jasper, Nebraska, and one o' these town crooks that figures a show's fair game had the sheriff plaster the whole damn show on account of his claim that paste leakin' down from some billboards had been ate by his chickens and killed 'em all. Accordin' to him he had the world's champion flock o' chickens. Even the rooster laid two eggs a day, and the hens laid omelettes to order.

"Sheriff showed up as we was tearin' down. He was a little drunk. Dad takes a look at the paper, sees the sheriff lookin' around, substitutes some blank typewriter paper he just happened to have in his pocket, and says:

"'This don't mean nothing'.

"Sheriff takes a look, figgers he's forgot the real paper, and hustles off. Say, a show was never loaded so fast before or since. We was pullin' out of town in four seconds less than nothin', flat.

"Dad Mettall could wiggle out of the electric chair after the current was on. If we didn't have t' sleep, I'd tell yuh some more."

Groody didn't object to sleep himself. Finally, under the shade of a towering canvas wagon, he dropped on his tarpaulin next to the boss canvasman. The day gave promise of being fair, and many of the old-timers chose the flats instead of the bunks for their sleeping.

Within ten seconds Groody was dead to the world, and he slept like a baby as the long white train with its Arabian Night cargo ambled through a sunlit, staring countryside.

CHAPTER XIX

SUSPENSE

IT WAS four-thirty in the afternoon when Bronk O'Donnelly awakened Groody. The flyer's muscles were stiff and sore, and life had a dark brown appearance for a moment.

"Let's get some coffee and sinkers—yuh said yuh wanted to see 'er go up," roared O'Donnelly. "Corpy, you wake up the boys. We'll be in in a few minutes."

Without so much as a handful of water to dash on his eyes, Groody followed O'Donnelly to the privilege car, which was crammed with hungry men. They knew there could be no food for them for two hours after arrival. As far as the canvasmen were concerned, there would be none until the show was up.

At five o'clock, exactly, the train was brought to a stop on its sidetrack, and easily five hundred people were waiting to watch it unload. Groody was with Bronk, leading a parade of laborers and canvasmen up the street. They followed the arrows which the twenty-four hour man had put up the day before to guide them to the lot. They had gone scarcely a hundred yards before the cookhouse wagons were rumbling off the runs.

Just behind Bronk and Groody came the squat Mr. Bad Order Slim, a negro of truly prodigious blackness. He carried a load of slim iron laying out pins.

The lot was a mile from the cars, and on the way Bronk undertook to explain some of the intricacies of laying out a lot.

"Yuh got t' watch yore entrance, of course, and have a good spot for the sideshow," he pointed out. "Then you got to see to it that your wagons can git in and out aisy like, and that there's two entrances. Then your horse tents can't be near the cookhouse. First thing you set is your kingpole pin. That's the

Number One center pole. From that pin, measurin' your show is a set up."

And Groody saw the truth of the statement. O'Donnelly scrutinized the lot briefly, and shook his head.

"The center ring won't be so level," he stated, but without hesitation he drove the kingpole pin into the ground.

In a trice men were busy with the measuring tape. The exact position of the other center poles, the menagerie, the back yard wall, the ballet, padroom and wardrobe tops—all were set by that pin. The sideshow and the candy joints on the midway, too. Dozens of wagons, each with their exact position in relation to the big top, could find their positions before the show was up. Small tents for various purposes would be erected from that one pin. Only the positions of the horse tents and the cookhouse were flexible, and Bronk had those located in jigtime.

Already the cookhouse wagons were on the lot, the steam wagon with pressure up. The stakedriver, stake and chain wagon, and pole wagons were following in file. The stakedriver—a wagon with a motor on it which worked a huge weight in a vertical sleeve—was being drawn from pin to pin, substituting a stake for each pin. Thousands of people on the outskirts watched the process as Bronk O'Donnelly, with less than three hours to do his job, started to demonstrate what the Gavin-Garfield show could do.

And they did it, the organization functioning with such perfection that even an amateur could see that the apparently inextricable confusion was really as well coordinated as the parts of a big machine. The various crews, stake and chain, pole-riggers, seat and stringer men, canvasmen, tore into their tasks savagely. They couldn't eat until it was done. The ushers unloaded the canvas wagons, unrolled the canvas, and then, with the aid of a crew of boys working for free tickets, unloaded the jack wagons. The ticket sellers were unloading the sidewall poles. Wagon after wagon wheeled into place, and the elephant herd came pounding through the streets to line up on one side before heaps of hay.

It was a shouting, milling, sweating city of workers. But two and a half hours from the moment when the train had come to rest a mile away, a city of canvas, topped with flags, lighted with electricity and brave with the music of two bands, was receiving the mobs of people who fairly stormed the gates. Over at the side, the cookhouse flag had been up for more than an hour, feeding the performers and bosses.

Groody was joined by Corrigan, who informed him that the ship was under reliable guard half a mile away. The people were pouring into the menagerie in a steady stream, while the band gave its concert.

"Let's get a good look inside," suggested Groody, and they walked through the connection. Little Joe Casey, star ticket man, was intoning his plea to the incoming mob:

"Get your reserved seats—high backed, comfortable opera chairs!"

Groody looked up into the maze of the big top. A hundred intricate riggings were there—trapezes, bars, steel frames. Electric light connections, guy ropes.

The flyer inserted a new cigar in the corner of his mouth.

"Two hours and a half ago a sixty car train held this junk," he stated. "Now look at it. Moving a city every day. And I've watched it, and I still don't believe it!"

"Nor I," grinned Corrigan. "Hello, here's the mail."

Fred Hershey, rube clown and also official mailman, presented Groody with a wire.

"Young," Groody said briefly. "He'll fly in to Herkimer tomorrow. Let's eat. Say, by the way, that cookhouse is supposed to take two and a half hours, Bronk told me, from the runs to the time the flag goes up and they're set to feed the show. Tonight they must have done it in about an hour."

At the boss's table on the stag side, where they ate, they found that they were practically alone, so he interrogated the leathery old showman who was the waiter.

"Hour twenty," nodded that worthy. "O' course, we had a fast breakfast—French toast. Now if we'd had pork chops, say, it woulda been a long time. Hour and twenty minutes alone, for them. But French toast is a good, fast breakfast. Bacon and eggs is fast, too—fifty minutes, say."

Under Groody's questioning the waiter expatiated on the cookhouse.

"Most o' the best showmen in the business started in the cookhouse—waiter or somethin'," he stated. "The old days was different, though, when yuh slipped the head waiter five a week for workin'. Tips, graft, you know. Show business ain't what it was. Why, a good connection man cleaned up a hundred or so a week. Short changers like Lefty Beazer and Take 'Em Tolliver was willin' to pay two dollars a day for workin', and then split with the show. Hell, it ain't show business no more. Me for the jungle pretty damn soon."

And he wandered away sadly.

GROODY and Corrigan wandered around the show, missing nothing from the sideshow to the big top. The cook tent, its work done, was being torn down again before they were out of it.

Most of their time they spent in the back yard, that soul of the circus where wander an aggregation of made-up characters which puts to shame a movie lot. Over by one of the wagons, near the dog and monkey pens, they found Mr. Mettall, feeding a monkey a banana. He fed the monkeys daily, and hadn't missed an appointment for forty years.

"Start backtracking tonight," the stalwart old man told them. "I hope nothing's got out, but the show's sure feeling different."

Groody nodded as they strolled away toward the back door, where more than a dozen girls were lined up, prepared for a combination trapeze act.

"I noticed that myself," he told Corrigan. "Remember how they were? Nervous and wrought up and jumpy—and scared. Now they're everything but scared."

"Right," agreed Corrigan.

It became more and more obvious as the evening wore on. The performers were laughing and clowning together, a certain undercurrent of nervous tension in their actions. It seemed to be, however, without any element of fear. The show was snapping into its performance to the last ballet girl and "Zulu", and the entire troupe seemed waiting eagerly for something to happen which was looked forward to with half uncertain, half zestful anticipation.

"A lot of 'em know what's ahead, and the rest feel it," Groody summed up. "All they needed was something to get their teeth into. It must be hell to be scared to death of something you can't get your hand on, at that."

The two flyers found themselves, for the first time, bona fide members of the show. They had been taken into the brotherhood of the trouper without reservation. Men and women whom they'd never met hailed them without embarrassment, in a matter of fact way which included neither unusual respect nor too much familiarity. Now that, for the moment at least, the show was on its way toward normalcy, the complete good fellowship of it was amazing.

"I'd always heard that there were a lot of social circles in a show," ruminated Corrigan. "The old circus families—aristocrats—all that. But as far as I can see the dirtiest canvasman borrows cigarets from Ed Wardell, and the ballet girls are as big as anybody.

"Hello, here come Musselman and Farrell."

The two managers were together, and for the next few days Farrell was to see to it that Musselman never got far away from him.

"They seem friendly," Groody told Corrigan as they watched the two men walk down the track toward the back yard.

The show was in full swing, and Musselman and Farrell were walking in front of the seats, wrapped in earnest and amicable conversation. Groody and Corrigan, leaning in the entrance from back yard to big top, were seen by Musselman, and his hand went up in a signal.

"Come out in the yard," Farrell told them quietly, and off near the men's end of the padroom he said:

"Mr. Musselman and I have decided that you start your flying stuff tomorrow. Young'll be in. You and Corrigan go over about eleven in the morning and you do your wingwalking. Then the real show with Young and the other plane over the lot at one in the afternoon. Circulars'll be out in Herkimer in the early morning."

Groody felt both pairs of eyes fairly burning into him. Farrell wondered whether he wanted to go through with the flying, under the circumstances. Musselman, believing that Groody thought Farrell after his scalp, might be thinking along any one of several lines. It was a tangled situation, from any standpoint. And, somehow, Groody, for the first time, became a bit uncertain of Musselman's harmlessness as far as he personally was concerned.

"I'm just seeing things," he scoffed at himself as he met the glowing dark eyes of the G. M. Aloud he said casually:

"All right. No parachute jump because there's been no advertising of it to stimulate the ticket sale, eh? I'll tell you what I'll do, though. If it's good country, I'll jump before the matinée, just to give the town a kick and to make up for lost time."

"Fine," declared Musselman. "You and Corrigan'll fly over to Herkimer, eh? Better make it early, so Young'll spot your ship."

"We'll take turns riding the train," Groody informed him. "The one that rides the train can have a field picked out for the ships. That avoids the possibility of wrecking on some concealed log or something like that. Bob here'll ride the train tonight."

That having been decided, the managers walked off and the flyers continued to watch the show. After it was over, Groody saw the show torn down. Fifty-four minutes from the time the last note of the afterpiece had been sung, the lot was clean and bare; the boss's truck was bringing up the rear of the procession to the cars, and circus day was over.

Four minutes after the truck had left the lot Groody was on his way to the ship. He dismissed the guard, and with his parachute for a pillow and a slicker for bed clothing he was sound asleep under a wing, dreaming fitfully of a handsome, blond young flyer named Young, who turned into Musselman for brief and surprising intervals.

CHAPTER XX

THE AIR ACT GOES ON

YOUNG was already in Herkimer when Groody, peering down from two thousand feet, spotted the field. It was separated from the show lot by one small cornfield, and Corrigan had fashioned a cross of planks to indicate the best landing direction.

Groody stalled the Jenny over the fence, landed lightly, and found Corrigan standing beside the new Jenny, which was painted exactly the same as Groody's ship.

"Young's over eating," Corrigan told him. "We might as well get started for our little exhibition. It's nearly eleven, and the town's waiting. They sure advertised it. Just a little, Musselman said, this morning—the object is to get 'em to the lot at one o'clock to see the real stuff."

Groody nodded, and they were off.

Herkimer, a tree-filled town of wide streets, big lawns, white houses and a small business district, mobbed the streets. Groody gave them just enough to whet their appetites. From the front seat the lanky flyer got to a lower wing, and with the aid of wires and struts walked to its tip. There, one hand on a strut and the other in the opening made for that purpose, he hung by his hands, feet down. Then, gripping the wingskid with his knees, his feet locked, he let himself down and hung briefly, head down, while Corrigan circled widely and slowly.

To Groody there was nothing at all sensational or nervewracking in those exercises. The height meant nothing to him. He was so constituted that three hundred feet meant no more, when hanging by his hands, than a gymnasium bar ten feet from the ground. Added to that characteristic was his matter-of-fact self-confidence in the air, born of more than two thousand hours in it.

Back in the front cockpit he gazed down on the swarming streets. Ten thousand people, he estimated, had seen him work right in the center of town.

"A lot of 'em should come out to the lot, then," he soliloquized. "But believe me—I wear the 'chute this noon. Not such a bad idea of mine, giving myself an excuse for wearing it."

The parade was a trifle late, and was just wending its way down town from the lot. From the air it did not seem to be moving at all, and it was a drab looking procession, gazed on from above. A few brightly colored robes, and the sun flashing on rider's helmets, but the effect of the ornate wagons and costumes was largely lost.

"It's a hell of a funny thing," reflected the flyer, "this circus business. Why do they come for miles to see a parade? Same reason I enjoy hanging around the show, probably. Which is a reason I can't figure out."

Back at the field was Young. As he shook hands with Groody the blond airman's white teeth flashed and his eyes were alight.

"Glad to be back," he stated. "We go to work this afternoon, eh?"

"Sure thing," agreed Groody while he was thinking:

"If he should turn out wrong I'll say he's the damnedest fool on earth. With that pan and that smile he could be the most successful crook in the whole wide world. He could steal the gold teeth out a man's mouth if he grinned at him."

Which opinion of Young was borne out during the next two hours as he rambled around the show. By dinner time, at twelve-thirty, it seemed that the laughing airman was the friend of half the men in the show. Not once did his face lose its boyishness, which meant that the smile was always in evidence, nor did a hint of the man Groody had seen on their flying trip together peep forth from his eyes.

Whether or not it was the effect of Groody's airwork and the advertisements of the afternoon's schedule, the fact was that at one o'clock there were milling around the lot and adjacent streets at least five thousand people. The sideshow had been packed and emptied seven times since eleven that morning, and more were clamoring to get in. Jack Farrell came rushing over to the field.

"Get in the air," he snapped. "Not a soul'll go in until the flying's over, naturally, and we got to get 'em started. Looks like we might sit 'em on the grass this afternoon."

"Got your written schedule?" Groody asked Young as he strapped on his parachute harness.

"Sure. Why the 'chute?"

"Going to jump when I get through."

"Strikes me as a punk idea," flashed Young blithely. "Wearing the umbrella for your transfer will take away some of the kick for the rubes. And it won't do you much good from a safety first viewpoint. You'll be too low to give the 'chute much chance."

"Right you are," Groody told him. "But there isn't time to come down again and put it on."

"Oh, it doesn't make any difference," Young returned carelessly. "The suckers are here. The job's done anyhow."

A MOMENT later the motors had barked into life, and with steadily increasing speed roared away on the warm-up. When the temperature hit seventy-five Centigrade, Groody, sitting way forward in the front cockpit because of the packet on his back, gripped the cowling for the take-off. It was impossible for him to fasten his belt around him, due to his position.

Corrigan had the ship in the air quickly, and climbed as steeply as the underpowered ship allowed him to. Young was taking off, as the lead ship reached three hundred feet.

It had been arranged that the ships were to keep within gliding distance of the field. This was possible because of the proximity of lot and landing field. Corrigan got into position, somewhat back of the lot, and pointed the Jenny on a course which would take it over the fringe of the crowd.

Groody, slightly awkward in his movements because of his 'chute pack and harness, eased himself to the lower wing. He walked the leading edge, over the heavy laminated spar, to the end of the wing, and then back. He leaned against the airstream, and most of the time did not hold on to struts or wires. He held one strut while Corrigan circled, and then the aerial acrobat started back toward the cockpit. Young was above them, now, circling as he waited for the time when he would be needed.

Groody climbed back into the cockpit, and then stood up on the seat. The propeller wash was added to the airstream now, and he was forced to lean forward at a considerable angle to fight it as he climbed to the top of the center section. There he lay a moment, flat on his stomach, while Corrigan sent the ship ever higher.

Down below, the great crowd was as motionless as the earth which was its background. Eight hundred feet, a thousand, and the tents had become giant mushrooms surrounded by a swarm of ants. The midway and show lot was a sea of upturned faces.

At twelve hundred feet the ship circled

widely while Groody inched himself forward until he was sitting on the leading edge of the center section. The Jenny was directly over the field, now, in good position from the crowd's standpoint. Every member of it could see the figure poised there on the edge of the wing.

The flyer wound his long legs around the two closely spaced center section struts, and nodded as his hands gripped the leading edge of the wing. His heart pounded and his eyes blazed as he leaned further forward and strove to get his breath. Corrigan was diving like mad now—there must be a maximum of speed for Groody's safety.

Now the plane was coming up, slowly and gracefully. Groody had no fear of the man at the stick. There would be no mistake.

The Jenny swooped upward in a graceful arc, then smoothly to its back. For one moment pregnant with dizzy possibilities Groody's hands and legs gripped like steel clamps as he looked upward at the earth. He hadn't expected that it would feel like that . . . .

Now it was coming out. With ever increasing speed it rushed almost straight downward, and Groody was leaning forward so far that anyone who had never experienced such speed must be certain that he would fall forward into the propeller. As the Jenny came level, at seven hundred feet, he gradually came upright again, and looked around at Corrigan with a blazing, boyish grin which was as different from his usual mocking smile as the Jenny was from a scout plane.

"That's a kick!" he told himself approvingly.

He rode comfortably downward three hundred feet, and then crawled toward the end of the left wing. As Corrigan got his plane pointed down the line of onlookers, Young, flying with smooth, sure skill, was easing his ship into position a few feet back of Corrigan, and twenty-five feet higher. Groody, watching, saw him pull the string which released the long, slender ladder attached to the undercarriage.

Hands on the leading edge of the wing, and on his knees, Groody watched approvingly as Young came steadily into position. It was excellent formation flying. The ladder, of heavy steel cable with rungs made of iron pipe, had enough weight to prevent it from blowing very far backward. It extended from Young's plane at an angle of about sixty degrees.

Now, Young was almost directly over Corrigan's plane, the right wing of the higher machine practically covering the surface whereon Groody was waiting. Slowly, with infinite pains, Groody got to his feet, crouched forward. He did not know it, but below even the ticket sellers had quit work, and the sideshow freaks were showing themselves for nothing.

Low as the planes were, the air bumps were somewhat troublesome. Young had sidled to the left a bit, and the ladder's end was five feet to Groody's left. Corrigan was flying straight and level. Up above, Young's goggled face was peering over the side of his cockpit as with the rudder he skidded his ship to the right.

The ladder's end was a foot above Groody's head, now, and a foot or so ahead of him, but still too far to the left to reach for. Every muscle tensed, he waited, watching the ladder with every atom of concentration in him. He had forgotten the ground entirely.

Young's ship was ahead, slightly, due to the inclination of the ladder. The pilot was watching, his head twisted backward.

The moment came. Groody lunged forward. And at that precise instant the ladder seemed to shoot upward several feet.

FOR the most terrible moment in his entire life Groody, overbalanced, fought wildly to recover his poise. Arms flailing like windmills, body out over the void ahead, feet still touching the wing, he fell forward. Nothing could save him from that headlong dive into the air—and the three hundred foot drop downward to where the horror-stricken crowd waited.

The parachute! As his hand groped for the ripcord ring, though, Corrigan did his part. Not until afterward did Groody realize how fast the rugged artist's brain had worked.

The Jenny literally fell away from his pawing feet at the moment when his body was practically parallel with the ground. His mind a whirling chaos of numbing fear and savage rage, Groody felt the Jenny leave him. Corrigan had nosed down steeply, and left him suspended in the air.

A split second later he jerked the ripcord ring viciously. As the pilot 'chute sprung out and he felt the slight tug of it, Corrigan shot the Jenny upward in a zoom. The wing appeared before Groody's dizzy eyes like some phantom of his imagination. Corrigan, distrusting the parachute at such a low altitude, had tried to catch him before he fell. The 'chute was out now, though. He could feel it. He was jerked backward, his limp body swinging downward.

But something happened. For once in his life the airman could not think coherently. For a second he seemed to be in a maze of loose shroud lines. They should be taut and in place, pulled by the open 'chute.

Then his body, with several shroudlines around him like a tangled net, seemed to drop straight down. It stopped with a sickening shock, and for a moment he was only semi-conscious as something tightened about his neck and was strangling him to death.

Head back, mouth open as he fought for one breath of blessed air, his bulging eyes were staring at the tail surfaces above him. Vaguely he realized what had happened. The big silk parachute had caught in the tail surfaces—that was why the shroud lines were tangled, and why he was being hung, three hundred feet in the air.

Only for a moment did his benumbed brain refuse to work. And it was hate which brought him back to life.

He always carried a knife when doing a parachute jump. Sometimes cutting oneself loose, even on the ground, was necessary to avoid injury.

Fighting grimly for consciousness, the pain about his neck only a dull ache now, he groped for his knife, and got it. The hardest task he had ever performed was forcing his fingers to do their work and open it. His body was swaying in the propeller blast, as though the limp airman were really dead. The universe was whirling about him, and the sky a crazy quilt of many colors, splotched with great gobs of red. He closed them as one finger followed the single line around his neck, up back of his head, and clung there. His other hand brought the knife up, and he sawed weakly at the line.

It broke, and he tore the limp thread from its flesh-hidden crevice in his neck. Without any strength whatever in any muscle, he gulped in great breaths of air, and swung happily while his head cleared.

He was still far from safe. He knew that. Hanging helplessly under the ship as he was, a landing was impossible. No telling how securely the 'chute had wrapped itself around the tail surfaces; it might tear away at any moment.

He glanced below. The great crowd was like a stormy, troubled sea. He waved his hand to show them that he was alive, at least, and then looked upward. Corrigan, flying automatically, was leaning far out of the rear cockpit, his dark eyes like two pools of living fire behind the goggles.

Groody motioned with his hand, simulating the cutting of the throttle. As the motor died he yelled:

"Get over water, low, sideslip and I'll cut loose and drop."

"Can't!" bellowed Corrigan. "The 'chute's got the elevators so they won't work enough to keep us level if we start in a good dive!"

The motor went full on again, and the propeller wash sent Groody spinning, with all the effect of a smash from some solid substance.

"Got to climb for it," the flyer told himself, and his lean face was as bleak and cruel as that of some devil's carved in stone.

He felt weak, somehow. For the moment, hauling himself up by his hands was as impossible to contemplate as though the distance had been a thousand feet.

Well, he'd rest a minute and gather himself for the ordeal. Gradually his head was clearing, and he was gathering strength. Of course, there was no time to lose. Suppose the Jenny started in a good dive as some bump hit the tail?

"If the motor cut out, that would finish off a nice exhibition," Groody reminded himself savagely.

Suddenly his head snapped around. He had almost forgotten Young. There he was, though, fifty feet to one side and a few feet back.

He motioned with his hand, scooping it outward. He was suggesting that he try to get under Groody, and catch him in the cockpit of his ship. Groody could snap his harness loose in a second, of course.

But the lanky flyer scarcely thought of Young's plan.

"I'm as helpless as a spitted duck!" he told himself slowly.

WITH the excuse of coming close to rescue him, Young could easily cut him to pieces with the propeller. That flailing six-foot stick would be a problem, even if the flying was done in good faith by the most skillful pilot on earth. Young would use it as a weapon, deliberately.

There was not the shadow of a doubt in Groody's mind that Young's slight zoom upward, when George had been groping for the ladder, had been premeditated. That meant that Young was a Musselman man, of course. But it meant more than that.

It proved positively that Musselman knew that his hired flyer-detectives were closing in on him. And he was trying to get rid of them before they could do harm.

"And an outfit like his, with flying to make murder easy and proof of it impossible, what a fix we're in!" Groody soliloquized.

He waved Young away emphatically. Despite the motions of his long arms, the other Jenny crept ever closer. Groody watched it with the fascination of utter horror. It could not be, that was all. They were circling almost directly over the crowd. His motions would be obvious from below. The crowd would know what they meant. Corrigan certainly would. Could that motionless, handsome young snake in that cockpit have the nerve to carve him to pieces then and there?

It did not seem within the realm of possibility. Corrigan would be left alive. Perhaps Young planned to escape without landing, no, it was all too fantastic!

But the propeller was within fifteen feet of him, now, its tip forming a shining circle of light in the clear blue air.

There were thirty seconds of sheer suspense such as the hardened flyer had never undergone before. Like a chicken with its head on the block and the ax poised over it, he waited and vowed a certain vow that he would carry out if he lived.

Then, so abruptly that Groody could scarcely believe it himself, Young's ship swooped away.

"That devil was thinking about it, right up to the last minute!" Groody thought swiftly. "Here goes!"

And he started up the tangled shroudlines, hand over hand. He was himself again now, and the long, stringy muscles were doing their duty. Nevertheless, his hands would slip and they were raw and bleeding and stinging cruelly as his wind-tossed body hung under the tail surfaces, one hand on the tailskid.

He tangled himself in the shroudlines to rest a moment. The muscles of his arms were torturing him, but he succeeded in transferring some of his weight to his legs. A brief respite, and he started on the last lap of his journey. It was far from an easy task for the exhausted airman to climb up over those shielding elevators, but he did it. Thankfully he lay on top of the fuselage, and breathed in great gasps as the wind cooled his perspiring face and Corrigan grinned and made motions at him.

The signals were unmistakable, and recalled to the exhausted flyer the fact that the ship was still in danger. Sitting upright, he worked feverishly at the parachute. He had unsnapped his harness, and the problem was to disengage the big silk umbrella. Without losing it, if possible. It was worth several hundred dollars.

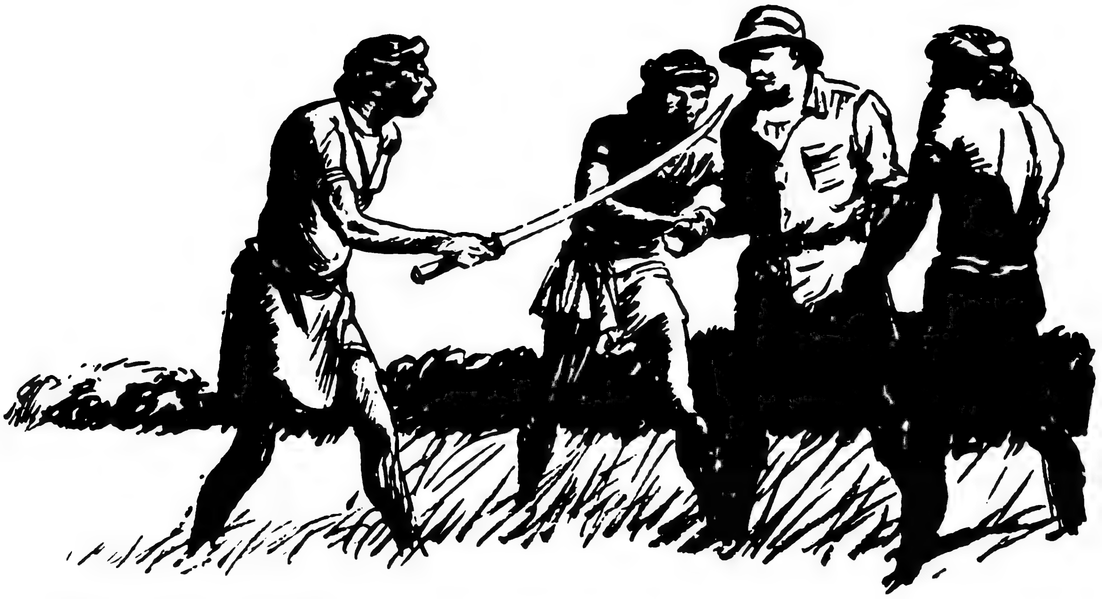
It had been caught in the space between elevators and horizontal stabilizer, and other sections of it were very thoroughly wrapped around vertical fin and cabane struts. Working carefully and keeping the free sections of the 'chute folded so that the wind could not whisk it away, he succeeded in freeing it and attaching it fairly securely to the vertical fin, bound with its own well tangled shroudlines.

Then, while Corrigan dropped slowly earthward he crawled up the fuselage, digging into the canvas with fingers and toes, and came to rest with his hands gripping the cowling of Corrigan's cockpit and his body flat along the top of the fuselage.

"Home at last!" he yelled to Corrigan, and that gentleman shouted briefly:

"Welcome! And wait till we get that guy on the ground!"

In the next, and concluding, instalment the gruesome circus mystery is completely uncovered, and the conspirators begin battle without quarter in the open.



The Last of the

"Tales of the Teak Forest"

THE CALL *of the* JUNGLE

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

THE Lord John Hinton was going home; thus was it whispered throughout the little camp. He was going back to the outside country on a journey which would take him many, many moons, and the forest would see him no more.

The dusky chainmen, coolies and mahouts debated the matter with much shaking of heads, and eventually a deputation was formed to see the white lord and ask him for the truth. The deputation, which consisted, among others, of Noi Tar, the little headman, and Ai Feeung, mahout, approached John Hinton's tent one brilliant April morning and salaamed profoundly.

"Lord," said Ai Feeung, who had made himself the spokesman of the group, "it is rumored in the camp that the Master is going back to the outside country. Lord, we would wish to know if this is so."

"It is so," answered Hinton quietly.

"The Lord will return to us again?"

Hinton paused before replying. Would he return? He wondered. He was getting on in years now, being well on the wrong side of forty, and by all rights he should resign in order to make room for a younger man. Yet he was still in the prime of life, and he could ride, march, climb and shoot as well as a man twenty years his junior, but—in one month's time he was due for a long leave in England, and once home he would in all probability resign from the company for good. The call of the West, with its great cities, its comforts, its white men and white women, was growing stronger every day, and he felt that the time for his retirement had come.

"The Lord thinks that he will not return," Hinton told his hearers at last, "for he wishes to go back to his own people."

A dismayed silence fell over the group, which was broken by Ai Feeung, the mahout.

"Lord," he whispered, "are you not our father and our mother? Wherefore how can we live when you are not with us?"

Hinton coughed a trifle gruffly. There was not one man in front of him whom he had not, at one time or another, humbled and punished, and yet in the depths of their dusky hearts he knew that they loved him. They were like children, he thought as he gazed at them—children that were in the main quiet, orderly and peaceful, though occasionally they could prove exceedingly mischievous and naughty, a fact which gave him an added sense of responsibility towards them. To part with them forever would be hard, deucedly hard, but the West was calling and his jungle days were drawing to a close.

"It is written," John Hinton said slowly, "that in the fulness of time, like shall go back to like. Therefore I return to my people. I have spoken."

They salaamed and disappeared, forlorn little black dots, into the green of the surrounding jungle. John Hinton, left alone, sighed deeply and glanced around his tent. Everything in the forest was in readiness for his successor, who would arrive in three weeks' time, and meanwhile there was nothing for him to do but loaf about in camp and put in order the numerous correspondence files that littered his table. His day of action, so it seemed to him, had at last come to an end.

BUT John Hinton was vastly mistaken in thinking that his days of action were over, for a week after the arrival of the deputation, a perspiring Lao rushed into the clearing with news that a Kaw tribe had raided Ban Fin, a village situated some twenty miles away at the northernmost end of Hinton's forest, and had carried off cattle and women.

As Hinton heard the words his eyes grew stern, for he knew something of the Kaws. They were a tribe that lived in the wild, mountainous country that is sandwiched in between French Indo-China and the land of the Kamoos, and they resembled the peace loving Lao people about as much as a man-eating tiger resembles a lap dog without its bark. Hinton had sometimes met their caravans, laden with bales of jungle cloth, silver fox skins, and baskets of walnuts, trekking down south to trade at the head of the Siamese railway, and often had he paused to admire them.

Their men were magnificent specimens of humanity, being tall and broad shouldered and possessed of a free-swinging gait that speeded them through the quiet jungle villages like all conquering soldiers. With them went black tongued, black coated Chow dogs, which were, like their masters, of fierce and relentless mien. And woe betide any yellow, sneaking pariah dog that tried to bar their path.

All this had John Hinton seen, and, mindful of the Kaws' high, Mongolian cheek bones, which gave a cold, callous ferocity to the features, he had often inwardly thanked God that they had contented themselves with peaceful trading instead of the sterner tests of war. But of late, evil rumors had gone the round of the Siamese villages concerning the Kaws. For it was whispered that one Check Oon had proclaimed himself chief and was advocating warfare as an easier means of obtaining the riches for which his savage heart yearned.

Hinton himself had heard these rumors and had duly reported them to the Siamese officials at the head of the railway though he had not placed much credence in them at the time. Now, however, their truth was being borne out with a vengeance, and one of the villages in his own forest had been the first to suffer. It was, he reflected, as if Fate had decreed that he should perform one last service to the brown people that he loved, and it therefore behooved him to act, and act at once.

But how? The nearest gendarmerie station was five days' march away, and even if the Siamese police possessed a strong enough force to cope with the Kaws—which he doubted—long before they could arrive on the scene of operations the robbers would be back over the border line and safe in their mountain fastnesses. None of his own coolies or mahouts were armed, and should he endeavor to muster the whole of the men folk of the raided village, he realized they would stand but little chance of success against a compact, well armed band of men who knew not the meaning of the word fear.

And then John Hinton came to his decision. He would ride off on his fastest pony, overtake the Kaws before they reached the border, and beard the chief. He would go without weapon of any kind and he would go alone. Hopeless? Perhaps. But with his natural prestige and a vast amount of bluff he might win through, and as he rose to his feet, the long odds sent a queer thrill through his frame and the blood surging richly in his veins.

He shouted to his pony boy, and five

minutes later he had mounted Sunstar, a sturdy, wiry Shan pony which could eat up the miles in a gallop that was as smooth as it was tireless.

As he cantered out of the clearing and onto the path that led in the direction of Ban Fin, Ai Feeung shot out onto the track and clutched at the bridle.

"Lord," said the mahout fearfully, "where are you going?"

"To Ban Fin," answered the white man shortly. "Out of my way, I tell thee."

"Lord, you must not go. If you do, certain death awaits you, should you quarrel with Check Oon."

For answer John Hinton clapped spurs into his pony's sides and the long ride commenced. Bending almost double to avoid the jutting out bamboos and overhanging branches that ever threatened to sweep him off the saddle, for hour after hour he galloped northwards, and by four o'clock in the afternoon he pulled his sweating pony to a standstill in the market place of Ban Fin.

HERE he found much wailing and gnashing of teeth among the villagers, for their stalls had been ransacked, sixty head of cattle had been stolen, and eight of their fairest maidens taken by the Kaws. None of the inhabitants of the village had been murdered, however, for the simple reason that no attempt at resistance had been made. The robbers, so said the stricken Laos, had come upon them completely unawares, and, overawed by the size and demeanor of their assailants, the villagers had been compelled to submit tamely to the spoiling of their homes.

Hinton, as he listened to the tale, knew that the peaceful jungle folk had done wisely in thus submitting, for he was certain that had one Kaw been slain, every man, woman and child of the village would have been killed and the huts burnt over their bodies. Still, the robbers had been guilty of an outrage to his people, he reflected grimly, and they would pay for that.

He therefore gave his pony a small drink of water and then, having ascertained the direction in which the Kaws had disappeared with their booty, spurred on once more to the northward. Ten more miles slid by and just as dark was approaching, the lowing of distant cattle stole upon his ears. On hearing this he reined in his pony and proceeded more circumspectly, till, on rounding a sharp bend in the path, he came in full view of the robber band.

The Kaws evidently felt absolutely secure in their own strength, for they had disdained to put out sentries and were one and all squatting around fires they had lit in the center of a large natural clearing on the right of the path. At one end of the clearing the cattle had been corralled within a roughly built bamboo fence; at the other, eight terrified Lao maidens crouched beside two gigantic Kaw guards. Of dogs there was no sign, and Hinton, as he took in the scene with one lightning glance, guessed that the robbers had purposely traveled without them, fearing that the barking of their Chows might give the alarm to the villages they had selected to raid.

The arrival of John Hinton came, therefore, as a complete surprise to the Kaws, for the thick, greensward muffled his pony's hoofs and the flare of the fires made the gloom of the surrounding jungle a solid wall of black in contrast. For a second, a dismayed silence fell over the robbers as he dismounted in their midst, and then they leapt for their weapons.

Hinton held up one hand.

"I come to see your chief," he said in the Kamoo tongue, which he knew was the common language of the mountain tribes.

They surrounded him and handled their weapons with gestures that were both hostile and significant. Hinton saw that they were some thirty strong—tall, virile, splendid, and as fierce as hell. A few carried old German Mauser rifles, though the majority were armed with long, curved *daks*, or swords, that gleamed cruelly in the dancing flames of the fires. Little mercy could be expected from men such as these. Nevertheless, as a figure taller than the others advanced and stood in front of him, John Hinton's mien was as steady as a rock.

"You come in peace?" asked the figure, who was Check Oon, the chief.

"No," replied Hinton steadily. "I come *not* in peace."

The chief's eyes flickered in astonishment, and then he gave certain orders. Hinton felt strong arms seize him from behind, and a moment later his wrists were securely bound together with strands of creeper. A systematic search of the surrounding jungle was then carried out by some of the band, after which Check Oon, satisfied that the white man was alone and defenceless, addressed his captive:

"Never have I seen thy like before," he said in the short, monosyllabic Kamoo tongue. "What is thy wish that thou shouldst come to me, alone and without weapon, yet not in peace?"

"My wish," replied Hinton, "and my *order*, is that Check Oon shall return the cattle and the maidens unharmed to the village of Ban Fin."

The chief drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

"Thou dost tell *me*, Check Oon, to do this?"

"Yes," replied Hinton steadily.

At the answer the Kaw was frankly puzzled. That a totally unarmed man should defy him, Check Oon, in his own camp, was entirely beyond his understanding. But this was a white man, the first that ever he had seen, and for a moment curiosity swamped his rising anger.

"Tell me," he said, waving a bronzed arm around the clearing, "are these thy cattle or thy maidens?"

"No."

"What is the white man's business?"

"It is the dragging of the timber in the forest."

"And has what I have done made any difference either to thy business or to those that work for thee?"

"No," answered Hinton again.

"Then what is the reason for thy visit?"

"It is because I am Lord of this forest and all the villagers of this forest are my friends."

NOW in reality, John Hinton was risking his life because he loved his brown people, but to Check Oon, chief and warrior, "love" was a word that came not into his vocabulary. The easy, pleasant, restful ways of life were not for him, and the only thing that appealed to his savage soul was bravery. Bravery was, indeed, his god, and he was forced to admit that the white man before him was very brave indeed.

"White man," he said, after a pause, "I have no quarrel with thee. If——"

"But I have with thee, Check Oon," broke in Hinton relentlessly.

The chief's fierce anger rose, and he shook his great fist in the other's face.

"Is it death that thou seekest, white man?" he cried.

"If death comes to me, it matters not," said John Hinton. "If I die, another white Lord will succeed me. He will come and rule this forest, and any evil that is done to the children of the forest will in the fulness of time be repaid a thousandfold. The white men never forget, and moreover, they are all powerful and as many as the trees of all the forests in the world."

"Thou liest, white man," breathed Check Oon. "But of a truth thou art brave. If thou wilt admit that I, Check Oon, am lord wherever I go, then wilt thou be free."

"Check Oon talks babe's talk," replied John Hinton. "And white men like not babe's talk from full grown lips."

The chief flushed in anger, and raised his *dah*.

"For that the white man shall die," he thundered.

The shining weapon flamed and gleamed in the reddish dancing light as it swung three times round in the air, but John Hinton stood as if carved in iron, and the savage lowered his blade.

"Check Oon will wait," he said at last. "The white man is brave, and Check Oon does not wish to kill bravery. Also the white man is defenceless, and Check Oon slays only in combat. Therefore will I give thee till dawn to reconsider thy decision."

"It matters not," replied Hinton. "For never will I take back the orders that I gave thee. And remember, Check Oon, for every white man that dies, one hundred dogs die also."

"So thou hast called me a dog?"

"I have called thee a dog."

"That will I remember," said Check Oon. "Thou hast, as I have promised, till dawn to live, and then, when death does come to thee, thou wilt be very grateful. I have spoken."

ALL that night John Hinton, untroubled by hope, sat on the lush green grass between two swarthy Kaw guards. Gradually the fires died down and hissed and spluttered into oblivion. The moon rose up in the sky and shed its clear, cold radiance over the forest trees that whispered gently in the cool night breeze. From within the depths of that forest there came the occasional cough of a panther, the trumpet of a wild elephant, the deep bell-like note of the barking deer, and John Hinton, as he heard these voices of the wild, was glad. He had lived a man's life, and was to meet a man's death in the surroundings that he loved.

As he drank deep of the fresh night wind, utter peace enveloped his soul. It was as if he had already crossed the border line of life, and all worries, all sorrows, all the pains and ills of existence had faded into some dim, queer past. He was alone with eternity, soothed by the wind of the jungle.

At dawn they came to him. They pulled him to his feet and tied him to a stake driven in the ground in the center of the clearing. They heaped dry brushwood at the foot of the stake, then crowded round him. In the pure dawn that flushed the towering stems of the forest, they looked at him. They were grim, silent, as implacable as Fate itself, and their eyes were cold, snakelike and utterly without soul.

The chief spoke.

"Your answer, white man?"

"My answer I have already told thee, Check Oon," replied John Hinton steadily.

Far up overhead two hornbills sailed on giant, swishing wings, showing up vivid white against the purple of the rapidly broadening sky; from near by came the soft *whoo* of monkeys calling to one another in the branches. Peace reigned supreme.

The chief stooped, then straightened himself in a lightning movement, for his quick ears had caught an unusual sound amidst the trees that bordered the clearing. Hinton also heard it, and then, as he glanced around, his heart seemed to swell within him and set the pulses hammering in his forehead.

For, as if by magic, the clearing was now ringed by fifty great elephants. They stood motionless, half in and half out of the towering wall of the forest, and in the tricky morning light they appeared possessed of almost uncanny size and stature.

Hinton's eyes, traveling desperately around, saw that Ai Feeung, mounted on Poo Ngurn of the missing tusks, was aiming with his, Hinton's, rifle straight at Check Oon's upflung head. From a second elephant the little headman was pointing Hinton's shotgun also at the chief. Another mahout had somehow procured an alarming looking blunderbuss, with which he shakily covered the entire group in the middle of the clearing. The remaining mahouts, together with the chainmen that crouched on the elephants' backs behind them, were armed with long jungle knives. Their features were pale, and their brown bodies literally shivering with fright, but they had screwed their courage to the sticking point and were obviously very much in earnest.

In a flash John Hinton saw his opportunity.

"Check Oon," he snapped as, the first shock of surprise over, he sensed a movement on the part of the Kaws to resist, "at my order not only will bullets assail thee, but my elephants will trample thee and thy men to nought upon the ground."

The mention of the elephants was enough. At the words the robbers flung down their weapons and raised their arms in surrender, since for the first time in their lives they knew fear, fear of this terrible white man who could command the kings of the jungle as if they were his servants. Check Oon, however, would have resisted to the last, but, seeing the defection of his followers, after a moment's hesitation he, too, threw his sword upon the ground.

"You have won, white man," he said sullenly.

TEN minutes later the robbers, with the exception of Check Oon, were grouped at one end of the clearing under the care of the coolies and mahouts. The chief himself was tied to the stake but lately occupied by his prisoner. Jungle justice was being done, and Check Oon, being of the jungle, moved not one muscle as he faced the white man standing before him.

"Tell me," said John Hinton. "Had not my elephants come, would you have burnt me, or would you have set me free after all?"

"Before I reply, there is one question I would ask thee, white man," said Check Oon.

"And that?"

"Did the white man know that help was coming for him at dawn?"

"I did not know," replied Hinton.

"That is the white man's word?"

"It is his word. And now for my question."

"Yes, white man, I would have burnt thee," said the chief, without flinching.

"Ah!"

Hinton took a box of matches out of his pocket. He lit a match, and the wind having died down momentarily, the flame burnt clear and steady. He glanced at the harsh features of the robber, then he glanced at the lighted match again. The faces of the Lao chainmen and mahouts whitened under their tans, for the burning of a man to death is no pleasant sight to behold. The Kaws at the further end of the clearing also stirred uneasily, for even they felt the tenseness of the atmosphere. Of all the human beings present, John Hinton, teak wallah, and Check Oon, chief of the Kaws, were the least moved at the prospect of the ordeal to come.

A pause—then the white man pursed his lips. The flame vanished, and a thin spiral of smoke curled up from the burnt end of the match. Time hung poised, then John Hinton spoke:

"Unbind this man," he snapped to his headman.

Surprised, the latter obeyed, and a moment later the robber was standing, tall and magnificent, in the center of a pool of sunlight that now came streaming into the clearing.

"Thou and thy men are free," said John Hinton, as he met the fearless gaze.

A subdued murmur of indignation went through the Lao people, which was promptly stilled by one glance from their Lord and Master.

Hinton then turned again to the Kaw.

"And now," said he, "will I ask thee the same question as before. Tell me, would you have burned me had not help arrived?"

For the first time that morning Check Oon appeared ill at ease, for he shifted nervously on his feet and his sullen eyes lowered to the grass.

"No, white man," he answered, after a long pause, "I would not have burnt thee. Thou wert too brave, and I could not kill such bravery as thine. But had thou betrayed fear by so much as the flicker of an eyelid——"

"Then why did Check Oon lie to me at first?" broke in Hinton.

The savage lifted his head again, and his eyes were now flashing. Standing thus, with the brilliant sunshine gleaming over his bronzed, muscular form, he looked a veritable Pan in his wild surroundings.

"Was I, Check Oon, to crave for life by excuses?" he cried fiercely. "Was I to show that I feared death when thou, a white man, had not done so?"

"In that we be equal," said John Hinton gravely. "But you are brown and I am white, wherefore am I Master of this jungle." The words cracked like the lash of a whip. "Check Oon shall obey me, and me only. He shall return the cattle and the maidens to the village. He shall also bring down to the village eight bales of jungle cloth in payment for much trouble caused to the Lao people. Further, he shall swear that never again will he raid a forest village."

Check Oon bowed with a queer, wild courtesy.

"Lord," he said, "we be brave men, you and I, but thou art greater than Check Oon, for thou hast something that I do not understand. Lord, on the honor of my father's father I swear that all thy commands shall be obeyed."

And Check Oon, chief of the Kaws, kept his word.

ON THE evening of John Hinton's return to camp Ai Feeung, mahout, accompanied by Chan Ooan, his wife, paid the white man a visit.

"Lord," said Ai Feeung, "we had thought we had saved the life of the Master. But did we not hear from Check Oon's own lips that he would not have killed the Master even had we not come? Wherefore am I, Ai Feeung, disappointed, for the debt has not yet been paid."

John Hinton, mindful of how he had brought the brown man and the brown girl together, and of how they had sworn eternal love and gratitude, smiled in assurance.

"Of a truth," said he, "the debt is paid. Thou hast helped thine own people, which is helping me, for hast thou not shown Check Oon that the Lao people are not afraid of him?"

"Lord," replied the mahout, in his open native fashion, "we were very much afraid."

Hinton smiled again as he pictured the

events that must have taken place after he had ridden away from the camp. He saw Ai Feeung, fearful for his Master's safety, urging the headman, coolies and mahouts to follow up on their elephants. He saw them nerving themselves to go, white faced and trembling, to the rescue. He saw their wonderful jungle craft that had enabled them to get their elephants through the thick forest without the slightest of sounds. And, lastly, he saw their simple, childlike love for him.

"Thou art a brave man, Ai Feeung," he said presently, "for thou hast conquered fear. Of a truth the debt is paid."

An expression of relief came over the mahout's dusky features, then Chan Ooan, his wife, leant forward. In her shapely arms was a fat, brown, squirming baby with sloe black eyes and round, shaven poll.

"Lord," she whispered, "have not I also kept my promise? For did I not say we would have many piccaninnies, the first of which would I call Yohn, and the second Hintoon? Now this, Lord, is the first. Wherefore is his name Ai Yohn."

Hinton coughed a trifle awkwardly and fumbled for his pipe. Chan Ooan continued:

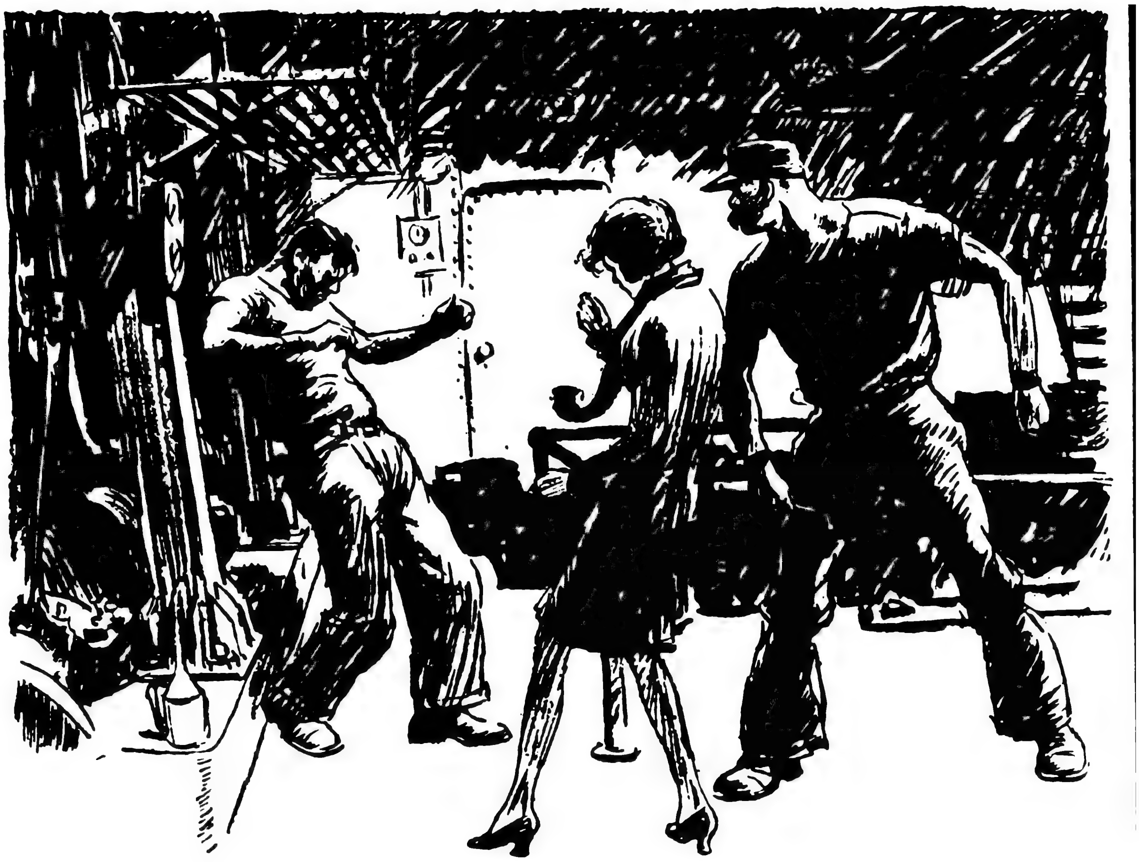
"The Lord will come back again from the outside country?" she asked him pathetically. "Is not he the light of our lives up here?"

"The Lord does not know yet," replied Hinton. "He must think."

"As the Lord wills," they said meekly, and crept out of the tent.

Alone, John Hinton sank his head into his arms. The West indeed was calling. But he thought of the simple, childlike people whom he loved; he thought of his elephants, wise, kindly, majestic; he thought of the peace of the jungle and the wild splendor of Check Oon, chief of the Kaws; and finally he lifted his head and stared with unseeing eyes into the dark gloom of the forest that walled his little camp.

"It seems to me," he whispered brokenly, "that the Lord Hinton *must* come back again."



THE clerk in the outer office, who acted as watchdog, tapped a second time on the door of the sanctum. When the reply came he entered diffidently, not at all sure of his employer's mood.

"Well?" Ezekiel Thrustover demanded.

"It's that Simon Talliver, sir. I told him you were busy, but he said you'd likely see him."

Mr. Thrustover drew a sheet of blotting-paper over the complicated calculations on the foolscap sheet. He was always adding up interminable columns of figures, his employees said; it was the mania with him. Calculating profits and losses; casting up eternal balance sheets. The man was money crazy, according to common report; but even his severest critics—and there were many—admitted that it wasn't for himself he was scraping and hoarding and gambling in order to increase his possessions. Because anyone within a mile radius of Leadenhall Street could tell you that Ezekiel Thrustover spent nothing on himself. He, the owner of the Pegamoid Line, ate sandwiches in his own office at lunch time, washing them down with water drawn from the leaky tap on the landing outside. His morning coat caused dapper junior clerks to cock derisive eyes. It was green with age and deplorably frayed at the seams; of a pattern that even the senior ledger clerk had forgotten.

"Simon Talliver, eh? All right, show him in."

And Mr. Simon Talliver entered.

He was a square-set man with a face that might have been hewn out of lignum-vitae. There was a definite suggestion of deep water about his double-breasted serge jacket; but his complexion was not that of men who faced hard weather on a ship's bridge. It was sallow, and it appeared as if coal dust still lingered about his eyelashes. Furthermore, a hint of stale oil showed in the deep creases of his face; and his boots, oil-soaked, failed to take a polish. But he seemed more or less at home as he doffed his square-cut bowler hat and advanced into the office; and without so much as a word of invitation, he seated himself in the second armchair.

"I was wondering," he said, "if you'd any thought of my doing a bit o' business for you this trip."

"Meaning—?" Ezekiel Thrustover muttered.

A Complete Novelette

LIVES *of* MEN

By

FRANK H. SHAW

A Tale of the Sea and of the Menace That Lurked in the Hold of an Honest Ship

"Meaning the usual, o' course. It's a clear six months since the *Invicta* went down——"

"Sh-sh!" cautioned Mr. Thrustover, with an uneasy glance towards the door that had closed behind Mr. Talliver.

"Nothing to worry about, sir. The inquiry found no fault with anyone. It was a derelict that ripped her bottom plates out and sent her down to the Locker."

"Seven men were drowned, though," Mr. Thrustover protested. "Seven precious human souls were sent, unabsolved, to their Maker. There was clumsiness—somewhere."

"Not on my part, guv'nor. No clumsiness when Simon Talliver handles a job. It wasn't my fault the starboard lifeboat jambed in the tackles—the mate was to blame for that. It's the mate's lookout to see the boats are ready when wanted. Anyway, you've pensioned the dependents of the deceased. You've pensioned 'em liberally; they've no cause for complaint. They're better off now, them women, than if their husbands were fit an' well an' boozin' away their pay days along the waterfront. Well, what about the *Cleomonc?* She's past her best, ain't she? She's expensive to run; and when her next survey comes along she'll be marked down. They tell me the next survey's due in March. I've been appointed second engineer of her, being unlucky enough never to have got my chief's ticket; since brains seem to count afore experience; and I ask you—what does it mean?"

"Weighing one thing with another, I fancy it means you require more money," Ezekiel Thrustover said with a wintry smile.

Simon Talliver made a spacious gesture, grinned a thought suggestively.

"It's the women," he mentioned. "They're the devil an' all. Daughters of the horse-leech, believe you me, Mr. Thrustover. It's a funny thing about me: I can't see a pretty woman without wanting to buy her pretty things—dinners and dresses and silk stockings and such like. It's an expensive hobby, but sometimes, believe you me, it's worth it. I've got a sort of a champagne appetite where women are concerned; and a beer income hampers a man. Every man's got his weakness; though some are hypocrites enough to pretend they haven't—but they *are* hypocrites."

A hint of quick color stained Ezekiel Thrustover's cheekbones, and his eyelids half closed.

"It an ill bird that fouls its own nest, Talliver," he said.

"Sorry. But most folks know your weakness. Anyone can tell you that Ezekiel Thrustover is anxious to pile up cash to make his only daughter an heiress. Hoping, I fancy, some dandy-fine young cully will come along with a title and make her 'My Lady'! It would be a fine thing for Ezekiel Thrustover, who started life as a loblolly boy in a penny-scraping windjammer, after he'd been kicked out of a workhouse, to have a nobleman for a son-in-law, wouldn't it?"

"Leave my daughter out of it, Talliver. Let's talk business," said Thrustover.

"As you like. I don't mind mentioning I don't greatly love the man you've put in command of the *Cleomone*. He's got mighty little use for the engine room, although this is his first command in steam. I don't mind mentioning he told me two hours since that a man who put on his shore-going togs over his engine-room underwear was a disgrace to the flag he served under. How did he know that I wasn't going to get a bath and change ashore, anyway? To hear him talk you'd think he was a navy commodore! Well, it was remembering the way he spoke to me that made me think it would ginger him up a bit if—if—well, if the *Cleomone* didn't fetch port on her homeward trip. That, and the need for money. Look here, sir. What's the *Cleomone* going to be worth after she's gone through her next survey—run in the economical way you've run her? They'll write her down two-thirds, even if she passes at all, which is doubtful. Whereas, until the surveyors give her the once-over, she's A. 1., insurable for her full value. Well, what about it?"

SILENCE ensued. Mr. Ezekiel Thrustover played with a paper-knife in the shape of a dagger. He appeared to measure his distance from Talliver, seated at ease in the shabby armchair.

"I wouldn't think nasty thoughts, guv'nor," the *Cleomone's* second engineer mentioned. "No good's likely to come of it—no good at all. I'm worth more to you alive than dead—stabbed through the liver. I've got a specialty, and you know it; and you won't find many men can do that sort of a job as neatly as I can—at the price."

"How would you do it, supposing—supposing—?" hinted Mr. Thrustover.

"Simple enough. Now, with the old *Poseidon*, it was just a case of knocking away a couple o' the inlet feed pipes with a flogging hammer; and her rolling did the rest. That, and a word to the firemen when the water came up over the stokehold plates. They insisted on the hooker being abandoned. And the desperate and loyal second engineer, last to leave the engine-room, managed to open a couple of valves from the top platform. He was commended by the assessors for that gallantry." Mr. Talliver winked broadly. "No suspicion, was there?"

"You've said enough to put you in jail for seven years," suggested the shipowner.

"I'll have company, then—don't have any doubts." Talliver tapped his breast-pocket, as if hinting at the presence of compromising papers. "Come on, now; you and I know one another too well to quarrel. I want five hundred pounds, because there's a girl I've got my eye on—damn the women!—and you want the present value of the *Cleomone;* not her next year's value. Shipping's slumping something cruel; and it's got to be worse. The *Cleomone's* worth sixty thousand at present valuation; and if she hits a derelict who's to worry, except the underwriters, and they've got all the money in the world."

"Derelicts aren't so common as all that," demurred Ezekiel Thrustover.

"A stick of dynamite in the shaft tunnel at two o'clock in the middle watch ca seem uncommonly like a derelict, guv'nor There's just a kick and a lurch; and if man lets out a yell that he can see the derelict surging away astern, who's to questio him? I'm not scared of my end of the job Five hundred pounds isn't much, weighe against sixty thousand—and the *Cleomon* wouldn't fetch eight thousand after he survey——"

"I'll think it over," Thrustover sai weakly. The actual figures impressed hi and corroborated previous convictions h had held. He was growing fonder an fonder of money, too, and though he d luded himself with the idea that it was a for Phyllis's ultimate benefit, his uneas conscience told him that he liked—pos tively liked—the hand-rubbing affability his bank manager and the deference shown him in such circles as he patronized. And, looked at from the most optimistic point of view, the *Cleomone* was a poor bargain. Even though an outward freight for her had been secured, she would, by reason of her working costs, be run at a loss. Whereas, her capital value, discreetly invested in a direction known to Ezekiel Thrustover—and the insurance people would have to pay—would return a handsome dividend. Tramp steamers were a miserable investment, now that the boom years succeeding the war were over. He admitted that he ought to have got rid of his fleet at the crest of the boom—but that was just the time when the craze for great possessions seized him, when Phyllis returned from her finishing school to gladden his eyes and titillate his ambitions. So, of course, he had hung on—hung on, expecting the boom to continue and prices to rise still higher, instead of which they'd slumped and he was left with a nigh-worthless fleet, costly to run; but—tangible assets if properly realized.

"She's sailing inside the week," said Talliver. "I've got a few details here you might be interested in." From an inner pocket he produced grimy papers, and ostentatiously displayed the outermost, which was a written agreement on the part of Ezekiel Thrustover to pay the sum of five hundred pounds down for services guaranteed to be rendered.

"There's one or two folks would be glad to set eyes on that," said Mr. Talliver, tapping the frayed sheet. "Especially if I put in my evidence. Well, I promised to meet that new girl about this time; so what about a hundred down?"

"This is blackmail," Mr. Thrustover protested.

"It simply means that you'll only have to pay four hundred instead of five, supposing you decide the *Cleomone* goes down the Locker—as you will decide." Talliver grinned. He got his hundred pounds, and retired, smirking with satisfaction, licking his sinful lips in anticipaton of unhallowed delights.

FOR some time Ezekiel Thrustover rested his grizzled head on his hand and pecked pensively at his blotter with the paper-knife shaped like a dagger. He was aroused from this reverie, which was a somewhat agitating one, by the announcement that Captain Gregory desired the favor of an interview.

"I thought you wouldn't object, sir, to my paying a call in person to thank you for appointing me to the *Cleomone,*" said the new arrival. He was a tall, sinewy man, lean of flank and determined of face. There was a genuine smile in his steady gray-blue eyes and he seemed to exude a suggestion of capability as he stood respectfully before the desk, fingering his soft felt hat.

"Oh, yes, yes—of course, yes. You're the master of the *Cleomone,* of course. To be sure. Ah—do you find her—comfortable?"

"Any man's first command is the Ritz and the Carlton rolled into one, sir!" Gregory said, with a ripple of laughter. "You don't know what it means to me, sir, getting command."

"Thank MacIntyre. He's the man who makes the appointments. I don't suppose you'd have got the job if he hadn't considered you suitable. Devotion to duty, owner's interests, eh? Remember that you're responsible for your ship's safety and—er—profit making. Miss no opportunity. Any complaints?"

"No, sir . . . Except that I've wondered whether it mightn't be possible to transfer the second engineer."

"Let's see? Who is second of the *Cleomone* now?" The shipowner's face was expressionless, so that it was impossible for Gregory to guess that the mechanic in question had been closeted in that selfsame office less than an hour before. "Second engineer of the *Cleomone*—eh? Wait—I pride myself on knowing the name of every employee of the company. I have it, yes—Talliver! What's your objection to Mr. Talliver, Captain Gregory?"

"I haven't any definite objection, sir. I daresay he's a skillful man; but—but—he is dirty in his manners and his dress and his talk. Perhaps I'm too fastidious. But it occurred to me that if he were transferred to the *Hector,* say—she's due in before we sail——"

"Rubbish, rubbish! Clothes don't make the man, Captain. Talliver has an excellent record—a conscientious workman, a born engineer. No, no. Don't commence your new command by finding fault with men who've served the company loyally for many years. Let me offer you a glass of sherry—not so good as some I've had, but still—palatable!"

There was considerable technical conversation over the indifferent wine. Gregory seemed to palpitate with eager efficiency; he had hints to throw out concerning possible markets, more lucrative freights. From time to time Thrustover nodded.

"Let me see. Your war record was good, I believe?" he mentioned after a while.

"I did my best, sir." Gregory made no mention of the fact that the fragment of dusky ribbon he wore on the left breast of his uniform jacket signified the highest honor that any man, soldier or sailor, can earn. The Cross had been awarded to him for a piece of particularly cold-blooded gallantry. Its details are recorded in more than one history of the Great War.

"Why do you dislike Mr. Talliver so much?" the shipowner asked, as Gregory was about to take his departure.

"I can hardly say, sir. It's hard to account for these dislikes. What got me foul of him was when he insulted my landlady's daughter who was bringing down my letters aboard the ship. She is quite a nice girl, engaged to an honest, hardworking man. But because she is pretty, Talliver seemed to think—however, he received as good as he gave." And Captain Michael Gregory laughed softly, as at a pleasurable reminiscence.

AS HE left the main entrance of the offices of Ezekiel Thrustover he failed to observe a girl alighting from a car newly drawn up at the curb. Actually, Captain Gregory had sighted an acquaintance approaching from lower down the hilly street—a man who had been shipmates with him during certain hectic events of the war. But Phyllis Thrustover saw his smile, and liked it. She was a modern girl, absolved from old-fashioned tyrannies which once on a time controlled the actions and even the emotions of unmarried women. She stared after Gregory as he literally ran down the pavement; and it is in the reckoning that she mentally contrasted him with certain men of her acquaintance who were not six feet tall and lean and vigorous.

"Who's that, Bates?" she asked the imposing commissionaire who still held the handle of the sedan in his hand.

"Which one is it you refer to, miss?"

"That big man who came out of the office and ran down the street. There he is—the one who's taken the other man's arm."

"Oh, that? Well, miss, he's a sort of a newcomer here; but bein' as I pride myself on knowin' all visitors, it's Captain Gregory, him that's got command of your pa's ship, the *Cleomone*. Now, my son, who was a marine in the War, miss, he says Captain Gregory is full-sized."

"He's certainly tall for a sailor," said Phyllis indifferently and entered the building.

Ezekiel Thrustover's thin face lightened when he saw his daughter. She was his abiding passion. For her sake he had played with fire, and on several occasions he had narrowly escaped scorching his fingers. Not a few men are like that, counting that the end justifies the means. Ezekiel Thrustover desired that his daughter should be in every essential a lady. His creed was that the possession of much indicated ladyhood; consequently Phyllis should own riches beyond avarice's dream at the appointed time. He knew that his own birth was a cloudy matter; he knew, moreover, that the wife he had married and who had died several years before, was of lowly origin; for he had wedded before success held out brimming hands toward him. He was sycophant enough to believe in the magic of birth; and whoever won Phyllis, he declared, must own a pedigree beyond all question.

"This is rather a pleasure," he said, his entire manner softening. "To what do I owe this visit? If one may ask."

"I want to take you out to lunch," Phyllis said, kissing him. "Phew! It's stuffy in here. There's a smell of rancid oil. It comes from this chair." It was the chair in which Simon Talliver had recently been seated; his uncleanly sleeve had rested on one of its arms.

"Why do you want me to lunch with you? Thrustover asked.

"To meet Mrs. Solway-Sturmer. She wants me to go to America with her; and though I told her that you couldn't possibly spare me, she said that if she could have ten clear minutes with you—fair field and no favors—she'd persuade you that it was necessary to my social salvation to go with her. Her nephew, Lord Archie Gelles-

Corrie, is be one of her party. Who's Captain Gregory?" That was Phyllis's way. She would interest you in something vital and then with the greatest nonchalance, switch off to some indifferent subject without pausing to draw breath.

"He's got command of the *Cleomone;* I don't exactly know why; but the marine superintendent has his reasons, probably enough. I've quite sufficient to do without troubling over details. Lord Archie Gelles-Corrie, eh? That's the Duke of Northesk's son, unless I'm mistaken."

"Same man—though I'm flattering him, daddy. Is Captain Gregory the same one who got a V. C. for swimming back aboard his 'Q' boat after she'd been torpedoed, and sinking the German submarine that did it?"

"Yes. I think he's the man. But of course, men do astonishing things on the spur of the moment without thinking what they're doing, and sometimes they find they've made heroes of themselves without intending it."

"And sometimes they apply for safe, cushy jobs, and bring influence to bear to get them snugly settled where there isn't any danger or anything to interfere with their comforts," Phyllis said; and it might be that she was reflecting on Lord Archie.

Ezekiel Thrustover consulted the memo block on his desk.

"I find I can spare time for lunch," he announced.

The title served as a powerful magnet. Mrs. Solway-Sturmer, too, was reputed to hold many strings in her well-manicured hands, and to be quite capable of pulling them to good effect.

"Well, let's be moving, then," Phyllis said. "I suppose the *Cleomone* hasn't any passenger accomodation?"

"One can't expect a chit of a girl like you to know all the details of the fleet. Why should you? The *Cleomone* is simply a tramp ship. She has a few cabins, but they are practically never used, except, perhaps, when there is a chance of conveying passengers from port to unconsidered port. Why do you ask?"

"I thought it would be rather a lark to go to America in my own father's ship, that is all," laughed Phyllis.

"If you do go—and I am making no promises—you will travel as befits my daughter," Mr. Thrustover said with dignity. "I can arrange with the Tocsin Line to reserve you their best accommodation. Now, let's go out and lunch."

PHYLLIS drove him with her own fair and capable hands to the sumptuous restaurant where Mrs. Solway-Sturmer was awaiting them. The lady had no difficulty in persuading the shipowner to agree to his daughter's journey. She dilated on the social advantages to be gained by such a trip. The close companionship of shipboard life, even in a big liner, offered astonishing possibilities. She was determined to earn the handsome honorarium that Ezekiel Thrustover had promised her in the event of Phyllis marrying according to his desires. Indeed, so telling did the lady state her case that Mr. Thrustover there and then went to the restaurant's telephone and, securing touch with the Tocsin Line, tentatively reserved accommodation for his much-loved daughter and her social chaperon. But the figure quoted for that accommodation caused him to purse his lips. He hated to part with the money. The moment any outlay became necessary his brain commenced to busy itself with schemes for reimbursing himself; and it was only natural, perhaps, that during Mrs. Solway-Sturmer's brisk chatter, his mind should return to Simon Talliver and his recent suggestion.

"But there mustn't be any lives lost this time," he mused. "No, Talliver will have to be careful. It's expensive to pension off these widows."

He had known all along that the *Cleomone* would go down the Locker sooner or later. Her period of usefulness was at an end; and she would be something in the nature of a white elephant by the time next March arrived. Too, he had already paid one hundred pounds on account of services to be rendered. He was quite aware that that sum would never be returned by its present possessor, and he was not the sort of man to spend money unnecessarily.

"Well, since you've agreed to let Phyllis go," Mrs. Solway-Sturmer said, "we'll have to be busy in getting her an outfit." And she talked glibly of the special garments required for such an expedition as this she had in mind. All unknowingly, she sealed the fate of the *Cleomone.* Thrustover's hesitation was swept away by the lightly-mentioned figures that trickles from the lady's tongue.

From the restaurant he took his way down to the docks and boarded the *Cleomone*. Talliver, he realized, had spoken no less than truth; the ship was no longer a paying proposition. Even when she was surveyed, she would demand an incredible outlay to recondition her. He spent half an hour in Michael Gregory's cabin, enlarging upon the necessity of keeping the ship's boats in a constantly ready condition.

"It is the meticulous attention to minor details that marks the successful shipmaster," he said on leaving the bridge cabin. "Don't trouble to come with me, Captain; I will just take a look over the engine room; and very probably one or other of the engineers will be on duty."

As he expected, he found Simon Talliver down below hustling the shore gang in his own peculiar way. Talliver, notwithstanding his weakness, had a way of handling the honest laboring man and contrived to get rather more than the average day's work from such as came under his influence. Down there in the oil-scented depths, he presented a picture of the utmost efficiency. He was explaining to a foreman fitter precisely what he wanted done to the packing of the intermediate cylinder, when he became aware of Mr. Thrustover's presence.

"You might like to see what they've done to—" he said, flinging a finger to his forehead and leading the way through the low doorway that communicated with the stokehold. Here, as it chanced, the two men were alone; and while Michael Gregory paced the narrow bridge and meditated on the joys of command, shipowner and engineer settled the details that were intended to deprive him of that command at a specified date.

"We can talk without fear of being overheard," Talliver mentioned with a knowing grin.

"It must be done on the homeward voyage," Thrustover said. "She'll be run outward with a minimum insurance, so there'll be no suspicions. Crossing the easting in February month, as she will be doing, entitles her to a bigger insurance."

When the shipowner went ashore a little later he did not even trouble to give a backward glance at the foredoomed fabric.

Five days after the *Cleomone* sailed, the *Radiant*, swagger ship of the Tocsin Line, departed for the west. Her passenger list carried the names of Lord Archie Gelles-Corrie, Mrs. Solway-Sturmer, and Miss Phyllis Thrustover. . . .

"OH, LORD!" ejaculated Ezekiel Thrustover. "The girl's mad, quite mad!" Not all at once did the significance of the words under his eyes seize upon him. The opening sentence was enough to cause him perturbation, however.

Phyllis wrote:

Daddy, dear,

I've refused to marry Archie Gelles-Corrie. When my time comes to marry I'd much rather have a full-sized man than a half-size. Mrs. Solway-Sturmer did her best; and she was successful according to her lights. Lord Archie decided that your money would atone for my lack of birth, and came up to the scratch as nicely as could be expected. But I simply couldn't bring myself to accept. It's difficult to write it all, but—well, he's laughable when he's in earnest; and fancy having a husband you'd have to laugh at when he was making love to you! And he's knock-kneed, too!

Apart from Archie, however, I've had a thundering good time. People have been very kind to me wherever I've been; but Mrs. Solway-Sturmer has frozen up a goodish bit ever since I turned Archie down. I expect she's afraid of missing her commission on my dowry! She's a mercenary woman.

So far Mr. Ezekiel Thrustover had read when the watchdog outside knocked perfunctorily and entered without awaiting a summons. His face was not so much white as tallowy, and his eyes were somewhat distended.

"This has just come, sir," he announced in a quavering voice, and laid a telegram before his employer. It announced curtly that the S. S. *Mineghan* had run ashore over a certain reef, and, breaking her back, had dropped her two halves into forty fathoms of water, thus becoming a total loss. Her people, however, were saved to a man. The *Mineghan* was the latest and best of Thrustover's ships; practically brand new, an economical ship to run, and a lucky one, so far as securing profitable cargoes was concerned. She was not insured; Thrustover had found it impossible to part with the sum necessary for the policies. Who, anyhow, was to expect disaster to a well-found craft of the *Mineghan's* class, engaged in fair weather trading? It was different with the *Cleomone;* she was newly insured to the very hilt, the policies having been taken out immediately her departure from her final port of lading was announced by cable. That, of course, was an excellent and quite definite speculation. Talliver would do his work without mistake at the appointed time; the *Cleomone* would never return save as sixty-odd thousand pounds' worth of insurance.

But this matter of the *Mineghan* was a heavy blow to bear.

"My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Ezekiel Thrustover cried, and dropped his corrugated forehead into his shaking hands. The *Mineghan* was worth the best part of a hundred thousand pounds when she left her last port; at this present moment she was not worth the price of a worn-out shackle bolt.

For counted moments Thrustover gnawed at his lips and fingers, wondering whether even now it might not be too late to effect an insurance on a lost ship. But—that action would be definitely fraudulent; furthermore, the news of the *Mineghan's* loss had come through Lloyd's; and every underwriter in the city would know of the disaster at once.

No, the loss was irreparable; and he was hard hit by it. He had been a fool not to effect an insurance on the *Mineghan.* He cursed Captain Lecky, who had lately commanded the ship. Thrustover had entirely forgotten that Lecky's much-loved son had been second mate of the lost *Invicta,* and had gone down with that lame duck when her appointed hour had arrived. He did not know how his son's loss had fretted Captain Lecky into a state verging on insanity—but crafty insanity at that. He did not know that the weight of bereavement had caused Lecky to imagine vain things, to jump to a maniac's conclusion that the *Invicta* had been feloniously destroyed, and that the only means of paying a debt was to cast away the uninsured and extremely valuable *Mineghan.*

"Thou hast indeed deserted Thy servant, O God!" Ezekiel Thrustover moaned in the agony of his greatly tormented soul.

Not that he was by any means a ruined man. Presently, while admitting the pity of it all, he wondered if it were not as well that the *Mineghan* had been uninsured. If she had been lost as an insured ship, six or seven months after the *Invicta,* and a week or so before the *Cleomone,* there would be gossip and suspicions. The *Cleomone* was as certainly doomed as ship could be. Mr. Simon Talliver, with his specialty, was in readiness to act; he had admitted as much in a discreet letter received only a day or two before. There could have been no chance of staying his hand at this late date; for the economical steamer was not fitted with wireless telegraphy; and she was now in mid-ocean. But none the less it was all a tragedy; one hundred thousand pounds clipped clean away at a stroke! It was as though one hundred thousand drops of blood had been extracted from Mr. Ezekiel Thrustover's heart.

Just as well, however, that Phyllis had refused to marry Lord Archie, who, being impecunious, would naturally require an equitable return for the dignity of his name. It would have been a good match; he might have lived to see his daughter a duchess. But there were other honored titles in the matrimonial market, and it might be possible, by dint of pinching and scraping and denying paint and varnish to his ships, to accumulate a little more against the hour of Phyllis's wedding.

But it was some time before he could bring himself to continue the reading of the girl's letter. A growing apprehension seized him. He realized that he had never understood this very charming daughter of his. She railed against accepted conventions, in a stormy fashion; she had quarreled with Mrs. Solway-Sturmer, it would appear, the chaperon having accused her of unmaidenly emotions.

He read the rest of his daughter's letter.

And all because I was so fed up with this gilt-edged life that I decided to get clear of it, daddy dear. So I'm coming home in one of your ships—the Cleomone. *By the time you get this I shall be on the homeward way.*

It seemed to Mr. Thrustover as though some strong and diabolical breeze had suddenly frozen him into a block of ice.

"No, no!" he grated. "No—not the *Cleomone!* No—!"

His eyes followed the neat script.

. . *You see, to tell you the honest truth, daddy dear, Captain Gregory strikes me as being the sort of a man a girl of my sort could get uncommonly fond of.*

"Talliver will understand—he's certain to understand. The man isn't a fool!" groaned the father, descending into the hell appointed for such as traffic in lives and human souls and discover, by sunrise, that it is their own heart's blood they have been exploiting. "He'd see the risk. Gregory had no right to accept her as a passenger——"

He discovered himself to be weakly praying for the *Cleomone's* safety, as the hot irons of his agony seared him. The threatened explosion of his own petard was stunning; it seemed to him as if a terrible down-pressing load were ageing him, bowing him down like a wilted shrub. Presently he continued his daughter's letter.

I am determined to know Captain Gregory, although I've only seen him once or twice. I've learned a queerish sort of a lesson just lately: money doesn't matter very much, and birth doesn't matter at all. But just so that poor Captain Gregory shall be given a fair chance, I'm not going as Phyllis Thrustover at all, but as Phyllis Wensley. Don't you think it's all a gorgeous lark? I want to know how the money that I've been allowed to spend has been earned; and the owner's daughter wouldn't be allowed to see the ugly sides of things; and I'm sure there are ugly sides. So I'm just pretending to be a little working girl who's managed to scrape together enough money to bring her home for a holiday in the most economical way; and not a single soul aboard will know anything to the contrary.

Fresh chills shook Ezekiel Thrustover. This much-loved daughter of his had been very thorough in her mad folly. He failed to read between the lines, to understand that Phyllis had formed a sudden emotional liking for Michael Gregory, as girls, even in these modern days, not infrequently do. Being of a determined disposition, she had seen no reason why Michael Gregory should not be made aware of her liking for him; since the old-fashioned days of wooing were gone forever.

AS THE case stood, therefore, Phyllis, the daughter for whose welfare he had toiled and schemed and dirtied his hands, was now embarked aboard a doomed ship; probably she was already lost in the foundered *Cleomone*. His fortune had been depleted . . . God's mills were assuredly grinding exceeding small! The gray bleakness of wasted effort settled down agonizingly on the soul of Ezekiel Thrustover. His stiffened lips commenced to move in unaccustomed prayers. Manlike he attempted to explain to his punitive Maker how strong had been his temptation; but a certain hard rationalism that formed a considerable part of his complex nature, told him that these excuses were in effect worthless. He had actually created his own temptations, he realized. It was not so much his daughter's welfare that had been subject for consideration but his own overweening vanity. He'd wanted all along to be able to say: "My daughter, Lady So-and-So—*my* daughter!" Thus claiming credit for bestowing upon the world a dazzling social light.

"If my daughter's life is saved," he bargained with his God, "I vow that I will ever afterwards walk uprightly. I will make restitution. I will square the outstanding account and leave a handsome balance on the side of righteousness." But though he writher in this agony of appeal, no balm was laid on his open wounds. You couldn't run a profit and loss account with the Almighty, Ezekiel Thrustover realized.

"An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth!" It seemed to him a tremendous voice was dinning into his agitated brain. He clutched painfully at his parting moorings; and in his misery saw the complacent veils he had drawn over his sinful acts for what they were worth. It was easy to repent and promise atonement when punishment menaced; but—even so, a portion of his brain was arguing that the insurance recovered from the lost *Cleomone* would reimburse him for his losses on the *Mineghan*. The habits of a lifetime are not easily broken, even in the hour of prayer.

And so, as was ordained, Ezekiel Thrustover walked through his own particular

Gethsemane, barefooted amongst the sharp thorns. A gleam of hope came when his clamorous brain told him that conceivably the *Cleomone* was not yet dispatched to that port of missing ships whence there is no return.

"It might be possible to send word to Talliver," he thought. But cold common sense assured him of such a probability's futility. Had his economical mind permitted him to equip the *Cleomone* with wireless, the matter would have been simplicity's own self; the order to the second engineer to hold his hand could easily have been transmitted and relayed; but—there was no wireless. Talliver, inspired by the need for money to satisfy his carnal appetites, would make a thorough job of it; the dynamite would be exploded in the shaft tunnel at a moment convenient to the mechanic, who would, after lighting his fuse, naturally proceed to the deck to be in a position to report the presence of the derelict that had caused the jarring shock.

"Bring me the line's chart," Mr. Thrustover commanded. The clerk produced it, an affair of crisscross lines, showing the routes of the various ships from day to day and their progress made along such routes. It seemed to the shipowner that the track of the *Cleomone* was limned with outstanding clarity. Making allowances for currents and delays, as the plotter of the chart had done, it appeared the ship was now one third of the way across the Atlantic. The month was February, when hard weather conditions might be expected. Mr. Thrustover had, inspired by prayer, no doubt, conceived a possibility of visually signaling the *Cleomone;* but though he pored sedulously over the chart, he saw no opportunity of doing so. Two of his ships were due to leave a home port within the next few days; one indeed, was chartered to leave for the Mediterranean that identical day; but the tracks of these ships in no wise crossed the track of the homecoming *Cleomone.*

"And I know nothing about this man Gregory—nothing!" And Mr. Thrustover moaned. Seeking solace for his hurts he ordered that the line's marine superintendent should be summoned. He desired to hug to himself a hope that Gregory might be a useful man in an emergency; one who would at least insure the safety of the *Cleomone's* sole passenger in the event of some grave emergency arising. MacIntrye appeared, a dour Aberdeen man, who had won to his present position by drastic economies.

"There's naught the matter wi' Gregory," he stated. "Conseederin' the lame ducks ye're runnin', Mister Thrustover, ye should be thankful ye've got a captain o' his stamp, if ye dinna want to be saddled wi' the weight of honest shipmen's death . . . Resourceful?... Oh, aye, he's a' that, an' more. Did ye no' read his war record? He's the sort that hangs on i' the face o' the impossible. I'm astonished he accepted command o' the *Cleomone;* but she was offerin', an' the lust for command runs hot in young men's veins. They've a likin' to be ca'ed 'Captain', ye'll ken."

"So that if—of course, it's not likely, but things of the kind do happen—so that if the *Cleomone* happened on ill fortune, you think Captain Gregory would be competent to deal with it?"

"I canna call to mind a better man. When he was a 'prentice lad an' the boozehound o' a skipper under whom he sailed ran his ship ashore on the North Cape in a snifter fra' the nor'west, it was Michael Gregory who swam ashore wi' a rope an' saved the whole crew . . . Was ye thinkin' aught oot o' common was likely tae harass the *Cleomone?*"

"No, no. But it's February month, and she's falling due for her survey."

"The reports are that weather conditions are bad in the western ocean an' promise to be woorse," said the superintendent. And, after discussing the loss of the *Mineghan,* he left Mr. Thrustover to his own thoughts—which were anything but pleasant ones.

Through the following days no news of the *Cleomone* came to hand. But disconcerting news did filter through. Stouter ships than she had gone amissing in the series of devastating gales that harassed the North Atlantic. The *Laconic* reached port with a story of heart-inspiring, deep-sea rescue work. The liner had collected the frozen and hopeless crew of the *Talmud* in weather that could not be described by the Beaufort symbol, so terrible was it; and the *Talmud* was a modern ship, well-equipped and entirely seaworthy when she left port. A powerful intermediate liner of seventeen thousand tons was reported overdue—quoted in the insurance market at a considerable premium. Each morning's reports brought fresh news, a monotonous tale of havoc and distress. The North Atlantic weather was worse than it had been for years, and there was not the smallest indication of improvement.

Throughout these days Ezekiel Thrustover meditated upon the impulses that had led him to juggle with lives of men for his own profit. Customarily he slumped heavily into the deep chair of his own study, staring moodily at the opposite chair in which Phyllis had been accustomed to coil her dainty slimness. His heart was very empty and his soul was consumed by a gnawing anguish. He realized that his accumulated wealth was of no more worth to him than so many fireless ashes. The inflated bubble of his colossal vanity was punctured, leaving but a huddled emptiness behind. So he endured in suffering through many days; and still no news came from the clamorous Atlantic.

IT IS to be feared that Phyllis Thrustover, known to all hands aboard the *Cleomone* as Miss Phyllis Wensley, a carefree working girl on holiday, with a pronounced fondness for Captain Michael Gregory's society, suffered from scant perturbation so far as her father's mental processes were concerned. She was thoroughly enjoying herself. The sedate formality of life as it had been lived on the outward-bound liner, where one changed one's frock as religiously as one sat down to a different and overplentiful meal; and the still more sedate formality of life as lived among the best American families—Mrs. Solway-Sturmer had seen to it that she met none but the oldest and most affluent families—had bored her. There was some atavistic streak in her nature that cried for the forthright things of existence. Here, aboard the battling *Cleomone*, she found much to create unholy pleasures in her pagan soul. Instead of being escorted to a seat at table by a supple-backed chief-steward, there to eat a slow way through multitudinous courses, such as the finest restaurant ashore might fail to provide, she was required to eat homely fare in company with hard-bitten men, who ridded themselves of streaming oilskins as they entered the saloon, and who talked, in curt sentences, not of the latest jazz tune or such-like trivialities, but of the weather conditions existing on deck and the ship's continued existence. A shirt-sleeved steward slammed chipped plates down before her, and wiped his hands on a none-too-clean apron as he suggested in a tobacco-stained breath that the salt beef wasn't too bad, considering this was an economically run tramp rather than an Atlantic record breaker. She heard caustic comments on the miserliness of the principal owner of the line; and she knew a thrill of sympathy when she, with her own eager ears, heard Michael Gregory express a wish that he might have Ezekiel Thrustover aboard for just one winter passage.

"Only one passage—that would be quite enough!" Gregory declared, drinking down thick pea soup which could as well have been consumed with a knife and fork as with a spoon. "I used to think there wasn't any price too big to pay for getting a command of your own; but I've altered my opinion since I've had charge of this perishing coffin! Don't forget to keep your lifebelt handy, Miss Wensley—night and day. Things are pretty bad now but they'll be worse before we've tied up in a home port. God grant it isn't a port of refuge, that's all I can say!"

"Well, if it's bad for us here in the saloon, what is it like for the deckhands and the people who shovel coal down in the stokehold?" Phyllis asked. "There's one of the firemen—you call them firemen, don't you?—who's quite a great friend of mine. He talks to me about his wife and children when he's moving the ventilators."

"I'll wife and children him!" growled Simon Talliver, who happened to be present at the table when Phyllis was speaking. "Tell me his name, Miss Wensley, and I promise you you won't be worried by him again."

"But I like it. He's going to take me to see them when we get to port," Phyllis protested. "He says that Robert, his second boy, is the most wonderful child who was ever born. He can almost play a concertina, although he's only four years old."

Simon Talliver eyed her gloatingly. He could never resist a pretty woman; throughout his checkered career women had been the shoals on which he had come to grief. He possessed that sultanesque kink in his character which set him at enmity against all possible rivals.

"He's lying, then," he said. "Don't you listen to these firemen fellas, Miss Wensley. They're always out to get your sympathy with a hard luck tale. And don't forget that you've promised to come down and see the engines this first dogwatch. If you want to get the proper hang of things at sea you ought to see a tramp's engines working in hard weather. It's a bit different from walking round a swagger liner's engine room when she is in dock."

The *Cleomone,* shouldering a dogged way through the Atlantic smother, gave a sick lurch that sent the dishes slithering from the table, notwithstanding the gallant effort of all present to save the crockery. From the steward's pantry came an unholy clamor of broken and breaking plates and cups.

"It seems to be freshening up a bit," said Captain Gregory, and laughed. That laugh had a heartening effect upon Phyllis Thrustover, who wondered, awed as she was by the soulful clamor, whether the *Cleomone* was about to complete her last disturbing dive. "I shouldn't wonder if it begins to blow a bit in the middle watch. You take my advice, Miss Wensley, and sit tight in your cabin tonight. Chock yourself off with pillows and things. The deck's going to be no pleasant place for ladies for the next few hours."

BUT Phyllis, thoroughly enjoying herself — Captain Gregory's deep-chested laugh inspiring confidence—staggered along a spray-swept deck just before teatime, and—a lurch of the laboring hull helping her—found it convenient to cling to the handle of Gregory's door for safety. That door was adroitly opened, a long and amazingly powerful arm reached out and drew her into harborage just as a grim, gray North Atlantic waved piled up and fell with a roar of breaking worlds on the *Cleomone's* deck. Phyllis tasted a queer, sick constriction of her throat and gulped down a spasm of her diaphram.

"You'd have been better to save up for another year and buy a passage in a full-sized ship," said Gregory, settling the much-worn red velvet cushions on his settee.

"I'm not so sure," Phyllis answered. Maybe it was the storm that broke down her ordinary sketchy barriers of reserve. "Liners haven't all got nice captains, for one thing."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Gregory, and there was a queer gleam in his eyes that failed to affright the girl. She was, indeed, so far from real fear that she smiled.

"Look here," Gregory said, not altogether steadily, "skippering a condemned wreck like this isn't everything. But I'm young, you know—young and pretty vigorous. Inside a year or two I might find myself landed with a decent job. Sure you're comfortable? What I mean to say is, one never knows when a bit of salvage might come along and give a man a chance to pick up some capital. We sailormen have to live on hope for the most part; and one of our biggest hopes is a—well, a little house ashore and a wife waiting for one's ship to come in. But a decent chap couldn't ask any girl, no matter how fond he was of her, to put up with furnished rooms—the sort of furnished rooms that a man in my position can afford, that is."

"Why not?" Phyllis asked daringly. "If the girl's the right sort of girl she can see the love behind it all."

"Do you mean to say—" Gregory gasped; and, magnetized by something in the girl's face, he reached out long, hungry arms.

After a while Phyllis lifted her cheek from his shoulder.

"Please," she murmured, "tell me about the time you fought that horrible German submarine!"

"Oh, that was nothing. It just came in the day's work. Honestly, sweetheart, could you put up with hard going for a bit until I get a decent job?"

"Of course I could—with the right man." She patted the broad shoulder that had afforded such a comfortable resting-place for her head. "But I've got to keep my promise to Mr. Talliver now, and see the engines."

"After tea, you darling. The steward shall bring it here, and you shall pour it out. I used to imagine what it would be like to have the real right girl pour out my tea. Are you quite sure—"

Phyllis took him by the coat lapels and drew his honest, weather-beaten face down to her own.

"Does that satisfy you, doubting Thomas?" she laughed a trifle breathlessly.

DURING tea they discussed a rosy future, Phyllis smiling wisely, for she knew what she knew. The time was not yet ripe for her to disclose her real identity; this love that had come to her was still too young and fresh and astonishing to permit of risks.

"Knowing that you care the way you do," said Gregory, "sort of—sort of inspires a man to think of doing big things. I fancy that I was a bit of a loose end, content to drift along in a sort of come-day, go-day, God-send-Sunday fashion. A ship that isn't headed for some definite port is a pretty aimless sort of a packet. But you won't catch me missing many chances now. There are plums in this trade for the man who has the—the essential guts to reach out and pick 'em. I'm not going to be satisfied with Ezekiel Thrustover's house flag all my life—be quite sure of that. A proper sailors' robber, that merchant!"

Ezekiel Thrustover's daughter widened her ears. She had not been entirely deaf to certain whispers that ran about the *Cleomone*. The advent of a young and personable girl aboard the tramp was such an unusual occurrence that hard-bitten men of deep waters were moved to indiscreet utterances on occasion. The steward had said something; that fireman in whom she had taken an interest had said more. So far as Gregory himself was concerned, his loyalty to the man who paid his wages forbade more than the customary growling.

"What's wrong with the ships of this line?" the girl asked.

"Nothing you can put a definite finger on; but they have a queer way of disappearing. Every now and then one hears a certain amount of talk. Thrustover's money-mad, of course; he doesn't miss many opportunities. Old ships sent out to be sunk for the sake of the insurance. Of course that's an old game, and, if it's worked successfully, a profitable game until you're found out. But, according to all the rumors, it isn't for himself that Thrustover wants the money; it's for some socially ambitious daughter of his that hopes to marry a big title. I wonder what she'd say if she knew her title was going to be bought with the lives of men?"

"She'd refuse such a title!" Phyllis said indignantly.

"I'm not so sure of that. According to rumors she's an empty-headed, self-seeking bit of froth enough. Well, there's one thing I'm certain of. She won't buy any title through me. This ship's going home, if I've to dive overboard and swim with her tow rope between my teeth."

"Perhaps Ezekiel Thrustover's daughter doesn't really want a title," Phyllis said sweetly.

"We'll give her the benefit of the doubt, anyhow. Since you've told me you care in the way you do, I've never a wrong word to say of any woman. Wash out Miss Thrustover. Miss Wensley's my chief concern."

"And Miss Wensley's promised to go down and see the engine room!"

"Good enough. I'll go with you; though the skipper's never welcomed down there. Take care of yourself. The old barge is beginning to chuck herself about a bit, and if anything happened to you *now*, God knows where I'd be!"

He opened the lee door of his cabin and handed her delicately out to the deck. It was already almost dark; and, as Gregory had said, the *Cleomone* was making nasty weather of it. There was a hint of sea fog. The horizons were narrowed.

"Hang on to this life rail," said Gregory, clamping the girl's fingers about the bar.

From the bridge above the third mate called:

"Would you mind stepping up here a minute, sir. I was just going to send for you?"

"I'll be back in a minute," Gregory said, as the foghorn blared raucously. "You skip along and get under cover. All right, Tomkins, I'll be up there before you can say 'knife.'"

The foghorn blared again, and it seemed to be echoed from the near distance.

Gregory made a quick spring for the bridge ladder, and reached "Mount Misery" just in time to drag the *Cleomone* out of the track of a ramping liner. Certain minutes were spent in recriminations. . . .

PRIOR to proceeding to his watch in the engine room at eight bells, Simon Talliver had, as he always did, satisfied himself that the sticks of dynamite with their accompanying detonators were all secure in his settee locker. He made his plans with his customary thoroughness. This present gale, judging by usual standards, would blow itself out in another eighteen hours. There would be a spell of fine weather succeeding the snorter, during which interval the *Cleomone's* boats could be safely lowered and navigated into the track of steamers with a more than reasonable likelihood of being picked up. Actually, Simon Talliver had timed his scheme for the beginning of the first dogwatch next day. The light would be indifferent, so that none could deny him when he raised the alarm of the squirming derelict squelching astern, after delivering the *Cleomone* her death blow. If human lives were lost it wouldn't be his fault.

Now Talliver didn't care overly, so long as his own life was spared, so long as he earned that five hundred pounds which was his established price for killing a ship. Women are so confoundedly expensive, one way or another. Expensive, but—attractive. This skirt who'd taken passage in the *Cleomone,* for instance. She had a pretty face and she was companionable in her manner. You could kiss a girl like that, and put the skipper's nose out of joint; for it was already common ship talk that Miss Wensley and the old man were as thick as thieves. Simon Talliver counted every woman fair game and delighted in detaching their affections from better men than himself.

He was cooling himself in the alleyway doorway when Phyllis jerkily stumbled towards him.

He shot out an unclean but capable hand and steadied her. A movement of the ship caused Phyllis to swing fairly into his arms, her hands about the second engineer's neck. Maybe it was the softness of her body against his own that drove Simon Talliver momentarily mad. Had Phyllis looked she might have noticed that his eyes became suffused and that a raw flush of color ran up under the grime of the engine room that smeared his face.

"I've been expecting you," he said.

The girl's first instinct was to cancel the visit of inspection; then she reflected that, as the prospective wife of a shipmaster—she was very proud of that potential honor—it was her plain duty to display interest in all the working of a ship. Above her head the roar of the steam siren sounded stridently; below was the thunderous pulsing of powerful machinery. Her head grew somewhat dizzy. But Talliver drew her over the sill of the engine room door with excellent solicitude, handed her a wad of clean cotton waste, and told her exactly where to place her hands for greater steadiness. Phyllis descended to the engine room plates, aswim with a curdled brew of oil and water. The noise was deafening, stunning; the great connecting rods seemed ready to leap at her like hungry monsters. There amid the whirling and the general thud and strife of it all, she presented an enticing picture and Talliver's amatory soul grew still more inflamed. He deemed himself a conqueror of women. He knew them, knew, he believed, their most susceptible moods.

"Steady on!" he boomed as the *Cleomone* lurched; and flung an arm about Phyllis's trim waist. Then, taking advantage of circumstance, he kissed her upturned and slightly astonished face. Phyllis promptly screamed; and that fireman in whom she had interested herself heard her scream, his ears being attuned to the beat and striving of the glittering steel and brass that were the *Cleomone's* engine. Luke Blake had come in search of fresh packing for a leaky water gauge, which packing was in the second engineer's charge.

"How dare you, you rotten coward!" screamed Phyllis, and drew her hand across Simon Talliver's suffused face.

"Come on, give us a kiss," urged the man who could never resist a woman. It is conceivable that many years of authority in ships' engine rooms had impressed him with the idea of his own majesty in such surroundings. Here, amid the sliding rods and the sobbing pumps and the clattering gauges, he felt massively a conqueror.

"Come on. Give a man a kiss," he urged, and pressed his lips to Phyllis's neck. Phyllis screamed again and fought for freedom. Mr. Talliver laughed crudely into her whitening face.

"Think I've not seen you sneaking along to the skipper's room?" he said. "Come on, there's no need to be stand-offish!"

"Let me go! I'll tell Captain Gregory—my father—" said Phyllis, honestly scared for once in her young life.

Talliver backed her against a guard rod and laid two hands to that rod, imprisoning her.

"You kiss me, first," he said; "then we'll see."

So Phyllis screamed once more.

"You let her go," said Luke Blake.

"Get back to your job, you swine!" bawled the second engineer.

But Luke Blake had no intention of going back to his job meanwhile. He had failed to discover any fashion of liking for Simon Talliver during the months of their association. For Talliver, when he could get away with it, was by way of being a bully. Furthermore, Phyllis had displayed much sympathetic understanding when Luke Blake had discoursed of his home and his children. And stories were rife in the firemen's forecastle of Talliver's way with women.

"Let her go," pleaded Blake.

Talliver released one oil-grimed hand and struck the chivalrous fireman under the chin. Blake, intent on completing a job of work—for he was a thoroughgoing workman—had brought his seven-eighths spanner with him as he came asking for the necessary packing rings.

"No!" cried Phyllis.

But the law of retribution still runs on the western ocean. The spanner caught Talliver neatly over his right eyebrow. Blake was merely acting according to his lights. When he was a soldier, in a row, he had simply unlocked his belt and used the buckle, as custom had taught him. In stokehold rough-and-tumbles he had employed such implements as came handiest. The slum creed that had been instilled into him from birth was that the man who hit hardest was the man who won.

"God!" Simon Talliver stumbled drunkenly and a lurch of the ship pitched him cleverly into the intermediate crankpit. His death cries were unnoticed in the general hubbub.

"You clear out. I'll stand to this racket, miss!" breathed Blake, white and pinched about the nostrils.

"But he struck you first," gasped Phyllis. "You were trying to save me."

Down the ladders came Michael Gregory, inflamed with the warmth of newly realized love.

"Well, sweetheart!" he cried. "Where's —where's Talliver?"

"He—he—slipped," coughed Phyllis. "He—he—fell down there! Oh, oh!" She clung to the greasy guard rail for support.

"What I wishes to state, sir," said Blake, evidently remembering old orderly room days, "is that Mr. Talliver attempted to molest the lady. I warned him, an' after takin' a blow, struck him."

"Come on up out of this," said Gregory, his protective arm about Phyllis's waist. He knocked at the chief engineer's door in the alleyway. "Something nasty's happened down below," he said, when MacFee's gray-bearded face protruded. "Talliver has fallen into the crankpit."

"That means I've got to stand his watch," said the chief unemotionally.

And so the *Cleomone* buffeted on through the wintry seas, as if unheeding the tragedy that had so recently occurred.

At eight o'clock next morning, such being the custom of the sea, with the *Cleomone* trudging sturdily through a comparative and short lived calm, the crew of the ship committed such of Mr. Talliver's remains as could be collected to the deep. The dynamite in his settee locker remained untouched and undiscovered for a considerable time. But his plot to sink the *Cleomone* had failed.

THE clerk in the outer office knocked on the door and entered Mr. Ezekiel Thrustover's sanctum.

"These two telegrams have just come from Falmouth, sir," he said deferentially.

Thrustover took the sheets of flimsy. The one from Gregory was uppermost.

REPORT CLEOMONE SALVED DUTCH LINER NOORDAL ABANDONED HARD WEATHER STOP CREW RESCUED PRIOR TO SALVAGE STOP ENTER CLAIM IMMEDIATELY FOR SALVAGE ON DERELICT VALUED AT ONE MILLION AND A HALF GREGORY

"This means salvation," muttered Ezekiel Thrustover, and lifted the second telegram closer to his eyes. It was from his daughter Phyllis. Apparently she had modeled her wording on that used by the captain of the *Cleomone*.

REPORT GREGORY FUTURE HUSBAND OF SELF STOP MARRYING BY LICENSE AT ONCE STOP COME DOWN IF YOU HAVE TIME STOP WELCOME MAN INTO FAMILY —

She had underlined the "man" in the Falmouth postoffice, but the telegram as received by Ezekiel Thrustover did not accent the word.

Thrustover went to Falmouth by the first train. He went almost humbly, remembering bygone agonies of fear and remorse and repentance. But when Phyllis greeted him on his arrival, when he saw the dancing light in her eyes, he forgot the half arguments he had prepared on his westward journey.

"He says that I made him do it, daddy!" she enthused. *"I!"*

"What do you mean?" Thrustover demanded.

"Well, everyone says that he's achieved the impossible by salving that thumping big Dutchman the way he did, with the poor old leaky *Cleomone*. Daddy, she's a pig of a ship. You've no business to own such a ship. But you ought to have seen that salvage. It was terrific. We thought the whole stern was going to be torn out when once we got hold of the *Noordal*. And it took a long time to get hold, one way and another. But we stuck it out——"

"We?" queried Thrustover, his eyebrows uplifted.

"Mike says that but for me he'd never have dared to try."

That appeared to be sufficient. But it pleased Ezekiel Thrustover, newly emancipated from bitter fear and the stifling horrors of sleepless nights, to be playful.

"Suppose I refuse to let you two marry?" he asked

She wagged a cautioning finger in his face.

"Don't—don't!" she said. "Don't play with fire, daddy. Mr. Simon Talliver—the beast—wasn't wearing his shore-going clothes when he was—ugh!—killed."

And for a moment a curious hardness chased the mocking laughter from her eyes. Ezekiel Thrustover asked no further questions. He realized that more miracles than one had happened.

HIGH WATER

When the Old Missouri Cut Its Traces

By HUGH PENDEXTER

OLD Fort Union had seen too much of pathos and tragedy for the arrival of the young couple, on a stormy night in 1866, to occasion more than a flutter of interest. An Assiniboin had stumbled upon them near the Little Poplar River, some thirty miles west of the post, where they had settled down to freeze to death. They were pursued inside the big stockaded enclosure by the terrible blizzard which marked the winter of '66 as one of the worst white men could recall on the Upper Missouri.

After the two were thawed out and fed in the bourgeois' house, and the girl had been put to bed by a Ree woman, Major Pease, who had conducted the Indian trade, interviewed the young man. He learned his guests were Burgess and Lucette Clair, brother and sister, and that the two were eager to get to Fort Rice, six miles above the mouth of the Cannonball, and then advance to another post, and so on, until they reached the States.

Major Pease removed his pipe and stared at the young man in amused pity. Finally he said:

"You should have started much earlier. It's a big storm that chased you and your sister in here. Other big storms behind it. Buffalo have been drifting south for a week, the Injuns report. They knew what's coming."

Unable to conceal his dismay, Clair insisted:

"We were told at Fort Benton that freight outfits were moving down to Rice every week."

"Earlier in the season, and after the river closed, we teamed back and forth," said the major, "but the road's blocked now. But even if it's to be an open winter you can't take a young woman down to Council Bluffs."

"This is an awful fix," sighed Clair as he viciously chewed the stub of his last cigar. "We can't go back to Benton."

"Not if I know weather on the Upper Missouri," grimly agreed the major.

"I was thinking of something else," muttered Clair.

"It's all out of the same bucket. You're hemmed in here till spring. Where did you start from?"

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"Virginia City, Butte, and other camps."

Pease shrewdly inventoried Clair's appearance, which smacked of the dandy, and remarked:

"You're no miner. Hands too soft and white."

"Gambler," frankly confessed Clair.

"You must have been in the gold camps long enough to know the climate up here," said Pease. "Why did you wait till the edge of winter before hauling out? It wouldn't be any of my business, if you didn't come here seeking shelter and food."

"Oh, I can pay well for our keep. I'm well-heeled," promptly assured Clair.

"Both in gold and the two guns you're wearing. One gun in your belt, and t'other under your left arm," mused the major. "But, son, I'm not running a boarding house. You're welcome to shelter and food. You can't pay." He paused to puff his pipe into life and bluntly asked, "What are you two running away from?"

Clair winced and eyed the major through half closed lids. But the major had a poker face and was content to wait. Clair surrendered, and with a shrug of his shoulders asked:

"Ever hear of a man called Bandergon?"

"Big Bandergon," murmured the major. "Yes. And I've seen him twice at Benton. Giant of a man. Bad name."

"He's the devil!" fiercely muttered Clair. He turned his head and listened suspiciously to the muffled howling of the storm as it raged across the big enclosure. Then he resumed: "Yes: he's one of the few men I've met who is all bad."

"Then I'm to take it you two young folks are running away from Bandergon?" prompted the major.

Clair nodded, and he anticipated the next query by explaining:

"The trouble between us didn't come to a head till late in the season. It came to a showdown in the street. I was quicker on the draw. Four men carried him to his cabin. He was said to be mortally wounded. I know now he had his friends tell that so I wouldn't pull out. He was almost a well man before I knew the truth. No storm can stop him."

"You still wear two guns. You've beat him on the draw once. Biggest man in the world can be stopped with a hunk of lead, placed right. I don't understand," said the major.

Clair's thin face flushed. He defended himself:

"He's the kind you can shoot to pieces without killing him. If I was the only one concerned I'd never quit, of course. But there's my sister, Lucette."

"He was after her? Not your sister. Your wife?" bluntly said the major; and his voice took on a rough edge.

Clair lowered his eyes and nodded. Then, as a further defense, he hurriedly insisted:

"If I could know I could take him along with me, even if he killed me, I'd stuck. But there's Lucette. If I were rubbed out and he lived there would be no one to protect her."

"Sounds silly," denounced the major. "I know scores of men between here and the mines who'd face a roaring lion to help a woman. . . But we've talked that over. It's ended. I think you did wrong in fetching the woman down here. But you're here. If it should be an open winter you two might make Rice with a freight outfit. You'd probably be held up there. But it ain't going to be an open winter, if I know anything.

"I shall always remember this winter. Alex Toponce and I bought the Government supplies here when the soldiers were moved down to Rice. The river was closed. Even if the ice had held off, they couldn't have moved the stuff. Only boat up here, the *General Grant*, is too small. Tonight, I'm afraid for Toponce's and my outfits, somewhere up the river and bound for Helena. Hear that wind! The outfits can't be much farther'n the Quaking Aspen, also called the Poplar."

"We passed a big outfit after the Indian picked us up."

"Toponce pulled out five miles ahead of my wagons," continued the major. "One must 'a' been traveling to cross the Aspen higher up than t'other . . . Well, to cut back to your worries. If Bandergon shows up here, fetching trouble, he'll never get started. I'm boss till Durfee and Peck, new owners, come up."

Clair cocked his head and listened intently; as if reading new voices in the storm. Major Pease advised him:

"Go to bed. Your trouble is probably five hundred miles away. Mine's on my shoulders; and I want to be alone and enjoy it."

Clair came to his feet, but paused to insist:

"If the storm doesn't keep up can we make it to Rice? I'd feel better where they have soldiers."

"Galvanized Yankees. Six of them. You're safe here."

THE morning came with dusky light. The big enclosure was a blur of driven snow. The warehouses, stores, shops, barns, corral, and employees' houses were almost smothered and obliterated. Clair ate breakfast with the major and said his wife would remain in bed to recover from the hardships of the journey. A Crow woman, waiting at the fort for a small band of Crow men to return from a horse stealing expedition among the Sioux, carried food and coffee to the young woman. Clair ventured outdoors, but soon returned and complained of the bitter cold.

At noon the sifting snow was so thick as to make the light as uncertain and murky as early evening. Late afternoon an Assiniboin man, who had started with the Toponce outfit, dragged himself through the north gate. After he had been thawed out in the post store he reported the wagon train was snowed in, with half the outfit always on duty, feeding the fires not only in, but between, the Sibley tents. He said the buffalo were drifting down to the river to find shelter.

Major Pease told Clair:

"What goes for Toponce goes for me. We both will take a big loss. If you'd been delayed a few hours you'd been frozen stiff by this time. This man says it's so cold the horns, tails, and legs of the wagon cattle have frozen. Some of them died, humped up in their tracks . . . You will be here quite a spell."

Night and day the snow and wind and intense cold continued. Even those who had been at the post with McKenzie, thirty odd years back, could not recall so severe a storm. These veterans, survivors of the era when the beaver trade established the powerful caste known as the "Kings of the Missouri", wagged their beards and predicted more storms.

The first day the girl attempted to join Clair and Major Pease at the table, she collapsed. The major pronounced her ill from a cold on the lungs and she was put to bed. The cold developed into pneumonia, and if not for the major's intelligent nursing she quickly would have died. While the battle to save her was being fought, the outside world raged intermittently. The snow seemed to be inexhaustible. Occasionally at midday a spot in the heavens, less dull than the overcast sky, marked the position of the sun. Then rivers of snow, whipped from horizon to horizon by a howling gale, would smother the upper and nether worlds.

Lucette passed the crisis, but Clair ceased none of his worrying. When not with her he played solitaire close by. The girl dragged herself back to life by indomitable will and the major's care, rather than by the help of any medicine. When she could talk she told him her history. She was one of the few survivors of an Indian attack on a wagon train at Hell Gate Pass, her father being one of the victims. She had been a dance hall girl and had retained her self-respect and had found life pleasant until Bandergon met her.

The major was all sympathy, although by this time he had ample troubles of his own. His and Toponce's livestock, some sixteen hundred head, had perished on the Aspen. Two mules, sheltered in a tent and fed on cottonwood bark, had survived.

Clair fretted like a caged animal. The girl improved until she could walk around the enclosure by leaning on his arm. Each day saw her strength increase, but her heart was heavy when Pease told the two of them that they would be marooned until late March, as the deep snows and thick ice would render the country impassable with floods.

One day, when the girl was not present, Clair told the major:

"It's coming to a showdown. Bandergon is on his way. I've dreamed it, and I found it in the cards."

"You talk crazy. The roads are blocked against him. But if the road to Fort Rice were open, the girl couldn't stand the trip."

"She's stronger than you think, Major," insisted Clair. "It's being penned in here that's hurting her."

The major plucked at his beard and pondered. He liked the young people. He had cared for the girl as he would for a daughter. He knew of Bandergon's evil propensities. His own tenure at Union would end as soon as the new owners could send a post trader up the river. He told Clair:

"You and the little girl are scaring yourselves sick. Just forget about this Bandergon. We'll talk about going down the river later. No hurry. If Bandergon comes here he'll be supple enough."

"If he comes I shall shoot him on sight to stop him following us," said Clair.

"That'll scarcely do," mused the major. "Unless he starts acting up. But we'll wait. No hurry."

THAT he was mistaken, and that there was need of immediate action, he learned within the next thirty minutes. He was at the river gate, overseeing the work of clearing away the drifted snow, when one of his own men arrived from the Aspen. The man rapidly reported:

"Toponce is on his way to Helena. Took the two mules that we kept alive in a tent. He'll bring back cattle 'n' hosses 'n' grub. But there's nothing to be saved. Both outfits are a dead loss . . . Oh I was forgetting. Stranger came through and ate one meal with us and then started down the river. Within a few hours another man came in. He brought word from the vigilance committee in Prickly Pear Gulch to stop a man called Bandergon, wanted for shooting Long John Gander, messenger for the committee. You're asked to git word through to Rice. We're sure the first stranger was Bandergon. We tried to overtake him. Vigilant played out ten miles back . . . No stranger come in here?"

"Long John snuffed out by that damn skunk!" cried the major.

"He wa'n't killed. But may be dead by this time. Bandergon must 'a' given you a wide berth. He's smart. We couldn't find where anyone had quit the river. Injuns we met hadn't seen him. T'other man'll be here soon and tell what I've left out."

"Go inside and eat and rest. I'll start the word to Rice."

He was canvassing the various Indians at the post for a suitable messenger when he was interrupted by the arrival of a short, bewhiskered man dragging a long sled.

"Dropped down for my supplies, Major, and a drink of red liquor," greeted the man.

"Take your list to the store, Joe. I'll be in and O. K. it . . . Oh, Joe. You're pretty snug up there?"

"Snug and goin' to make a han'some profit, Major."

"Fine. I'll see you before you go back."

As the man hurried on to secure his supplies and the much desired drink, the major hurried to the house of the bourgeois and inquired for Clair. The Indian woman pointed to the girl's room.

"Tell them I want to speak with them," he directed.

The young people came to him at once. Clair looked thoroughly miserable. Lucette had been weeping. He bruskly told them:

"Joe Petts has just come in from the old trading post on the tongue of land between the Yellowstone and the Missouri. It's Tom Campbell's old place. Abandoned when Tom found it was too close to Union. Petts uses it when trapping and poisoning wolves, cutting wood and gathering ice for the steamboats. He has an Indian and a squaw with him. His white help have pulled out. It's out of the way, off the travel path. Two good cabins. Fine place for you two to stay in until this bugaboo of a Bandergon has been rubbed out. You're all right here in Union. But if you want to be off the map——"

"We do, we do," eagerly broke in the girl.

"When can we start?" asked Clair.

"Petts will be going back soon. I'll arrange for it. You can help him haul his supplies. Easy trip as you'll go up on the ice. Lucette can ride when she tires of walking. It's only three miles. If you don't like it you can come back any time."

"You've been mighty good to us, Major," said Clair.

"You can square it off by being good to Lucette, to yourself. Now I must look after Petts and explain to him. I'll see he starts back as soon as he has packed his tobacco, sugar, flour 'n' coffee. You're welcome as sunshine, without working or paying a cent. But it would be all right if you helped him with his work, or pay him something. I'd work if I were you."

"I'll both pay and work. I'm well fixed. I expect to pay you——"

"Shut up!"

IN HER new surroundings Lucette greatly improved in health and spirits. She shook off the fear that had assailed her and dogged her husband. The journey up the Missouri on the ice was a wonderful adventure in itself. The river bottom extended almost three miles on each side of the old Campbell post and was well timbered. She felt she was isolated from the world. The post consisted of two log houses, parallel to each other and a few yards apart. These were stoutly stockaded at the ends so as to form an open court between the buildings.

Petts was a silent man, much used to solitude. On arriving at the post he had told the Indian woman to look after the girl and had directed the Indian hunter to take up quarters with him and Clair in the other cabin. Then he plunged into the work of skinning the frozen wolves which, during the cold spell, had been piled up like cordwood. Clair was not good at this task but he made himself useful in other ways.

For the first time since finding himself in a feud with Bandergon he felt almost happy. They were off the beaten track. Did Bandergon come down the river he would keep traveling. When the weather moderated Petts and the Indian pelted the frozen wolves. When it turned cold they ran their bait line and set traps. Already much wood was cut and corded for the summer's demand for steamboat fuel. The big ice house contained many tons of ice cakes measuring three feet in thickness. All indications pointed to a very profitable summer for the wolf trapper.

Then came a morning when mist rolled through the bottom lands and the cottonwoods and willows steamed. The sun soon burned up the mist and flooded the forks with warmth and brilliance. The heavens seemed to lift and expand, and the high lights of spring invited the Clairs to riotous optimism. Lucette babbled in sheer joy at having done with the dull gray canopy which so closely had shut in and smothered Fort Union. There was no work for her to do, but she pretended to help the squaw and sang many old songs as she fussed about her cabin.

This promise of spring was withdrawn overnight. The new day came in dark and forbidding, and with a strong wind dusting the houses in snowy gusts. Petts stepped to the doorway and listened to the wailing of the storm and said something in the Indian dialect. The Assiniboin grunted in reply. Petts turned back to Clair and lugubriously remarked:

"Hell 'n' repeat ag'in. Had a notion the old feller up north would let us off with what we've had."

"Another storm?" lazily asked Clair from his bunk.

"Ringtail snorter."

Clair was not depressed. What hemmed them in would keep others out. There was a snugness in the situation that rather appealed to him. When the meat was put on the coals to cook, he rose and, with a blanket over his shoulders, went to the door. The cottonwood growth was blurred by the storm. He decided the wind was increasing in violence every moment. It came from the north with a rush and a roar and was muffled a trifle by the growth in the bottoms. By the time breakfast was eaten the forest crown was being whipped most savagely.

"Glad we aren't squirrels," said Clair.

"Sixty mile wind," grunted Petts.

Clair crossed to the other cabin and talked with Lucette. She was exulting in the warmth and security of their refuge. As the howling of the blizzard increased in volume and the temperature dropped, Clair decided he preferred quiet and sunshine. But the girl minded it none. The cold could not hurt them, as Petts had many cords of wood for the steamboats. As for food there was much meat in the ice house.

As Lucette grew more spontaneous and buoyant, Clair's own depression increased. Finally he sighed.

"I'd give anything, except you, sweetheart, if we were down at Council Bluffs."

"Come, come, old sober face. This is good fun," she rallied. "Something to talk and brag about when we get back to the States." After a bit of a pause she demanded, "Is there anything to fear?"

"No, no. But I'm tired of snowstorms."

"Plenty of wood and food, and the timber breaks the force of the wind. Winter's having a last fling at us, and we don't mind it a bit."

Her company and high spirits dispelled his gloom. He whistled a tune as he returned to his cabin, with the wind pounding his back, and the storm drowning the sound issuing from his puckered lips. Petts, idle for a wonder, was seated cross-legged on the floor, smoking his pipe. Clair told the old man that Lucette was greatly enjoying the storm. Petts slowly replied:

"Wind 'n' snow can't hurt us. Nor the cold, neither."

"Just what my wife says. We're all right, and I'd rather be here than at the fort," said Clair.

As the young man settled down to play solitaire Petts added:

"Water may bother some."

With a card suspended between thumb and finger Clair gave him a humorous side glance, and queried:

"Going to rain?"

"Thaw," was the laconic reply.

Clair smiled broadly. Thawing weather and the return of the genial sun would be most acceptable.

"You've been wanting a thaw so you could finish skinning the wolves," he reminded Petts.

"There's thaws 'n' thaws," muttered the old man. "I don't want too damn much of anything."

The Indian came in and spoke briefly. Petts interpreted for Clair's benefit.

"Says a buf'ler bull is standing close to the stockade. Come here to find shelter. Buf'lers are keen critters to know ahead what weather's goin' to be."

AFTER three days of continuous snow and high wind, Clair began to wonder if the storm would ever cease. He was getting apprehensive. And then one morning he woke up and missed the howling among the trees and discovered there was a new touch of warmth in the cabin. Through a small opening which served as a window the sunshine was streaming in. Jubilant as a boy he leaped from the bunk and dressed and gaily shouted:

"It's all finished. Spring's come for sure!"

"Big thaw," Petts quietly remarked.

Stepping to the door Clair beheld a new world. The woods were filled high with hard packed snow. Ridges of snow overtopped the cabins. White-tail deer, elk, and buffalo were walking on these huge drifts and browsing on the tops of willow branches protruding above the white carpet. By the time Clair had eaten his breakfast and had waded across to call on Lucette the snow was melting. The girl's gay mood had persisted. The Indian woman, busily tanning skins for moccasins, leggings, caps and mittens, gave the girl an inscrutable glance and then gazed through the open door. When Clair returned to his cabin he found Petts and the Indian at their routine task of removing the entrails of wolves and skinning them.

This work had been done outside the stockade. Close association with the task did not appeal to Clair and he must have betrayed his feeling of disgust; for Petts suddenly told him:

"Don't stick up your nose, mister. This buf'ler wolf's coat is worth two dollars. Smaller ones fetch from a dollar to one 'n' a half. I've got a cord or more of 'em, besides my elk, deer, 'n' buf'ler hides."

Virtually a prisoner in the stockade Clair found the confinement irksome. He played solitaire and visited his wife. All day the sun pelted warmly down on the bottom lands, until a man would sink to his waist where the wild life had walked and fed on the willow branches. Petts expressed a hope it would turn cold during the night. Clair said nothing, but hoped the thaw would continue until the ground was bare. He had his wish. It thawed throughout the night and by morning the snow inside the stockade was slush. The ridges were greatly reduced in height.

Petts was moody and not inclined to talk. In answer to Clair's questions he mumbled:

"In for a big thaw. If it keeps up some of these critters will sp'ile before we can git their jackets off. Too much of a good thing."

The sun was so warm Clair went around in his shirt sleeves. Late in the afternoon a Ree Indian rode in through the snow and slush and talked rapidly without dismounting. After Petts and the Assiniboin had replied, the man hurried away. Clair inquired the nature of the fellow's errand.

"Says the ice will bust up and we'll be drowned out," gloomily explained Petts. "Of course we know we'll have more water than we can use if this keeps up. But she's bound to freeze tonight."

That night Lucette crossed the court and told the men she was afraid. She could not tell the cause of her fear, unless it be strange noises she insisted she had heard in the woods. Petts tried to assuage her fears by explaining:

"Just the wind in the cottonwoods, little lady."

She alarmed her husband by suddenly becoming hysterical. Clair placed her in his bunk and sent the Indian to the other cabin. The girl was very nervous and could not sleep. She kept quiet and the two men slept soundly. They did not hear what brought her to her feet and to the door of the cabin. She heard someone talking to the Indians in a low voice, but ceased to give further heed once she discovered she was standing in ice water. She reached down her hand and discovered water was seeping in at the door. She made her way to her husband's bunk and shook him into wakefulness, and cried:

"Water's coming in!"

Clair lighted a candle at the coals of the fireplace and aroused Petts. The old man held the candle high and scowled at the water slowly spreading over the uneven floor. He reassured the young couple:

"It ain't nothing. It'll run off 'fore mornin'."

Yet he rolled up the bedding and added extra blankets and some tanned robes. Leaving the bundle on his bunk he went to the door and threw it open. The noise of unchained waters could be distinctly heard.

"We must strike for high land," Clair urged.

"More'n two miles away. Ground all cut up by small channels that'll be bank full," discouraged Petts. "An' it's pitch dark."

It not only was dark from the overcast sky but a dense fog swathed the bottoms, as revealed by tenuous streamers drifting into the candle light.

Telling them to remain by the door Petts stepped outside. In a depression close to the stockade he floundered waist deep in the chilly water. Returning to the fog filled doorway he quietly reported:

"Low places filled with water. No current as yet. Prob'ly won't git any worse but we'd better do our waiting on top of the cabin. You climb up, Clair. I'll pass the little lady up to you."

"We'll freeze!" cried the girl.

"If it don't freeze we'd be drowned if we stick in this cabin," impatiently replied the old man.

"But if it rises that high the cabin will be swept away," exclaimed Clair.

"Stockade posts at the corners are set deep 'n' frozen in. Houses can't go till the water melts the frost. Step sharp."

Clair scrambled to the flat, dirt covered roof of the cabin and received the girl from Petts. The latter brought from the cabin the bundle of blankets, some extra moccasins for all, and a fur cap for the girl. By the time he had finished the water was waist high inside the cabin. Now the voice of the waters was much louder. Ice in the cross channels was breaking up and grinding against trees. Huddled on the roof, and with nothing to do but await daylight, they became conscious of a loud voice in the second cabin.

"That ain't th' Injun or his squaw," Petts said.

"I forgot," said the girl. "Someone called at the other house just before I waked you."

"One of Major Pease's men, sent up to see how we was faring," said Petts.

SOON the noise of the flood increased to a roar, although there was but a slight current as yet. Petts talked loud to make his companions hear. Clair crawled to assist him in tearing puncheon boards from the end of the cabin. From these and some tanned hides Petts improvised a windbreak and started a fire. Voices shouted to them from the roof of the other cabin. Then a small blob of light showed through the thick mist.

"They've got a candle burnin' behind a windbreak. Why don't the fools start a fire!" Petts said.

The girl leaned against him and shrilly asked:

"Is this the worst?"

Petts coughed out some smoke.

"Th' worst if it only turns colder," he replied. "But if it keeps warm till the ice gorge gives way it ain't nothin'."

He stared in amazement at the shaggy head of a white man coming over the edge of the roof. Clair made an inarticulate sound and grabbed for the guns he had left at the head of his bunk, now under water.

"Bandergon!" the girl screamed in fear.

"Yes, Bandergon!" answered the man as

he drew his dripping figure clear of the icy water.

He was a huge man, and his big face was covered with a bushy black beard. He had been compelled to swim, or else he had stumbled and fallen, as he was soaked from head to foot. As if not feeling the chill of the flood he shook himself like a big dog and squatted some ten feet from the fire and stared at the girl and then at her husband. He had witnessed the frantic gesture of Clair's hand inside his coat, and he had seen it slowly come forth empty. His eyes dilated and he grinned broadly. Then he was saying:•

"You're in a mighty hard fix here. No one can take the girl out alive but me."

"You won't take me out!" cried the girl.

"Then you'll drown. Even a beaver would drown in that icy mess." And he waved a big hand at the roaring darkness. The clamor of the rising waters was all in one key, except when a tree snapped, staccato, under the inexorable pressure of the ice. And the gorge had yet to let go.

Bandergon had decided Clair had no guns, or else was afraid to use them. He believed all must work together if any escape was effected.

"All in the same boat," he bellowed. "A truce till we see what this rise is going to do to us."

Clair crouched beside his wife, his gaze never leaving Bandergon. The latter kept back from the fire and pulled out a long Colt's revolver and examined it critically. Petts wore only a skinning knife in his belt. The girl was unable to switch her gaze from the huge figure. She dully wondered why her husband did not commence shooting even if the return fire should kill the two of them. For Bandergon to her was something bestial and inevitable. She had overlooked one avenue of escape, the awful chaos now surrounding the cabin.

Bandergon, satisfied his gun was in excellent working order, restored it to its holster. Then he grinned at the girl and tapped the handle and glanced at Clair. She understood the threat. He would kill her husband, and she frantically endeavored to plan so he might kill the two of them. Slowly she worked her arm around her husband's waist, her fingers searching for a weapon.

With a loud laugh Bandergon told her: "The fool ain't got any guns on. He got the best of the fuss in Helena. Now he ain't even armed. I'm boss on this roof and if a move's made which I don't like, only two will be on this roof when the sun comes up. T'others will be drowned in the high water."

"See here, mister. None o' that," said Petts. "There's folks on the roof of the next cabin. You can't make any killin's near Union with witnesses to tell."

"An Injun and his squaw," grunted Bandergon. "This is a six-shooter." And he tapped his belt.

Then the dawn was upon them before they knew it. The sun was warm and dazzling once it had burned up the fog. After one sweeping glance at the sickening desolation now revealed, Lucette sagged heavily against her husband. For more than two miles on each side of the cabins the earth was submerged. The Yellowstone was backing up, and the Missouri was rising. It only added to their fearful isolation to perceive Indians on the high ridge north of the Missouri watching them, as if waiting for them to perish. Death was edging closer each minute. Already the black waters were almost to the eaves of the cabin. Only the stout stockade posts, frozen in, held the structure in place.

Petts broke the silence by bitterly complaining:

"All my steamboat wood gone plumb to hell! Ice house shaved off close to the ground."

Without looking at him Bandergon harshly ordered:

"Cook some grub, old man."

Petts made some pancakes and coffee and Bandergon ate first, bolting the food like a wolf. Clair emerged from a deep study of the all important problem: How to encompass the death of the hairy giant? Even bullets, to be effective, must hit a vital spot. He had tried bullets once, and here was the beast, with every advantage. Clair had canvassed the possibilities of using Petts' short skinning knife, of using a noose of rawhide, a club, and a violent, unexpected shove that would send the man into the water. From this welter of desperation he drew but one conclusion: the man would require a lot of killing, and did the first attempt fail he promptly would slay all but Lucette.

Petts called attention to the Indian man and woman now ripping up puncheons and roof logs and fastening them together with rawhide ropes to serve as a raft. The raft was soon finished and moored to the corner of the cabin.

Finishing his pancakes Bandergon asked Petts:

"Is this the worst?"

"It ain't nothin', mister, alongside of what'll happen when the ice gorge gives 'way as it soon must," replied Petts.

Bandergon shrugged his heavy shoulders and shifted his gaze to Lucette.

"You fetched me down here, prob'ly to die," he told her. "But you're worth the gamble. I'm going to take you clear of this mess. Clair can't save his own hide."

"You won't take me. I'll stay with my husband," cried the girl.

"You'll go with me as your husband's widder," replied Bandergon, his eyes glowing, his hand slowly creeping to his belt.

"Here, here!" loudly cried Petts. "No quarrilin'. Injuns have made a raft. You two fellers buckle down 'n' help me make one."

Bandergon immediately became active, but never turned his back on either of the men. His great strength permitted him to strip off logs as though they had been so many shingles. He left it to Petts and Clair to tie the material together. The raft was moored to the cabin, almost on a level with the roof.

By sundown, slush ice was grating against the two houses and scraping off the wolf skins and rawhides fastened against their sides. Under cover of the night Lucette whispered to her husband to attempt to take her down the flood on the raft. He knew this would be certain death and not to be accepted only as the last resort. Even could the raft float them to safety he knew they could not gain it, as Bandergon remained at the corner where it was moored. Lucette slept but little through the long night. When she dozed off for a few minutes she would awake and seize Clair's hand convulsively. When he bent low to comfort her he could hear her moaning miserably. Petts slept soundly for several hours.

THE morning brought them a change in the picture, one which was more terrifying, if possible, than any yet presented. Big cakes of ice were passing and ramming the growth. As they stared out on the uneasy waters there came a dull booming sound. Clair involuntarily exclaimed:

"The ice dam's broken!"

Bandergon's smoldering eyes quickened, and his lips drew back in a snarl.

"How long before it reaches us?" he fiercely demanded.

"Not for twenty-four hours. Timber'll catch much of the ice 'n' slow it down."

"You said we'd have no chance," reminded Bandergon.

"We'll have twenty-four hours, I reckon."

"Why don't we use this raft?"

"Waitin' for the Injuns to cut loose. Their house, being west of us, will go first."

Bandergon stood erect and stared steadily out over the bobbing ice to detect any abrupt rise in the flood. Petts bent over the fire and rapidly whispered to Clair:

"Cannon at Union. Injuns on ridge took word. Pease has started a Mackinaw."

Clair's drooping head slowly came erect. Bandergon suddenly turned to glare at the three of them. Clair's head sank low in dejection. Before he could give voice to his vague suspicions, a huge cake of ice struck the Indian's cabin and moved it north a dozen feet. The man and woman jumped onto their raft and cut loose, and with poles began fighting to cut across the current north of the cabins, to get away from the Missouri and to gain the back waters of the Yellowstone.

The marooned men and woman watched the Indians frantically pole clear of the sullen clutch of the moderate current and by seizing branches work in between two trees. A huge cake of ice hit the end of the raft, and swept it under. The red man and woman, without attempting to right their float, scrambled to precarious perches in different trees.

"We'll do better," said Petts. "Not so much swift water to cross."

Bandergon assumed command and ordered:

"Git me the longest, stoutest pole you can find. You two will do the steering, both poles pushing on the left side. I'll be the paddlewheel. We must strike directly across where the timber's thick enough to keep off the ice."

Petts quickly produced the longest pole

he could find and, at Bandergon's order, pulled the raft along to the south corner of the roof. Bandergon stepped aboard and cried:

"The woman next. You two take that end. It'll be the front."

Lucette took her position in the middle of the bobbing craft. Clair untied the rawhide rope and held the raft close to the roof while Petts passed blankets and the food to the girl. Bandergon pointed to the fire and said:

"Throw on wood for a fire."

Petts turned and commenced collecting what was left of the fuel. He heard Clair cry out and wheeled around as the girl gave a terrible scream and tried to rise to her feet. Bandergon's left hand prevented this maneuver, while his right hand thrust forward the pole as if it were a spear and caught Clair in the chest and knocked him breathless on his back. In impotent rage Petts saw the raft being propelled toward the cottonwoods. He saw the girl strive to throw herself into the water, only to fall senseless under a flail-like sweep of Bandergon's open hand. Gasping and choking Clair came up on his knees. He would have toppled off the roof had not Petts caught him and held him back.

"Let me go!" cried Clair.

Petts restrained him from leaping into the water only by exerting all his strength and by pinning him down on his back. Then he upbraided him:

"You young fool! Help her any if you git drowned? Git up 'n' behave."

He leaped to his feet and sent a volley of terrible invectives after the raft. Bandergon's tremendous strength was forcing the float toward the nearest clump of trees. After each propelling thrust he would shift his pole to keep from being swept down where the two Indians were marooned. He succeeded in working the raft between two big cottonwoods, which were flanked by smaller growth. He waved derisively at the two men on the roof, but almost immediately was compelled to give his attention to a big floe bearing down on his position.

The icelocked bends of the river were rising and attacking the timber. And there were many passengers on the large cakes. White-tail deer rode by. Rabbits and wildcats traveled on the same floe. Stately elk were borne along to drown in the Missouri. One huge ice raft held four buffalo.

With a few turns of the mooring rope Bandergon tied the girl's hand and feet, and then climbed from tree to tree to fend off the menacing ice.

"Down flat!" cried Petts. "He's going to shoot us!"

This as Bandergon, perched in the crotch of a tree, poised his revolver. Clair stared dully.

"What's gnawin' him? He ain't watchin' us!" Petts yelped.

Bandergon was staring to the south, or up the current. A small flat bottomed boat, atop of a big cake of ice, was riding the flood. In the boat sat a man. Bandergon fired at this castaway, who promptly stood up. He was a good six feet and a half in height, and his sparse build made him look even taller. Bandergon fired again. The tall man reached for a gun. Bandergon fired twice, chipping the ice close to the boat. The tall man shaded his eyes, but seemed to be in no haste to return the fire even after he had drawn his gun.

"Oh, why don't he shoot!" groaned Clair.

Bandergon fired his fifth shot and then commenced scrambling back to the raft. Petts screamed:

"He's 'lowin' to use the gal for a shield!"

This warning could not have reached the stranger; nor could he see from his position that the huddled heap on the raft was a woman. The two on the dismantled cabin roof did not feel their support when it moved from its foundation. Clair was conscious of but one thing: a miracle had almost happened. Then, suddenly, the tall man brought down his gun and fired. Clair yelled in joy. Bandergon had caught the lead, for he lurched awkwardly and all but fell into the water. He hooked his left arm around a branch and drew his gun. The tall man fired again, and the half raised weapon sank. Once more Bandergon began raising the gun. The man on the ice fired twice in rapid succession. The watchers saw Bandergon's gun drop into the dark waters. They saw his grip on the branch slowly loosen, and then he fell, like a bag of meal, into the racing tide.

A gun sounded to the north. Petts and Clair jerked their heads about. A thirty-five foot Mackinaw was almost upon them and already was turning aside to rescue the Indian man and woman. Besides the two oarsmen and steerer the Mackinaw contained Major Pease.

"Catch a rope!" roared a voice and they found the man from the south had pushed his boat into the water and had shot down to take them off.

They leaped in and Clair pointed to the stolen raft and yelled incoherently:

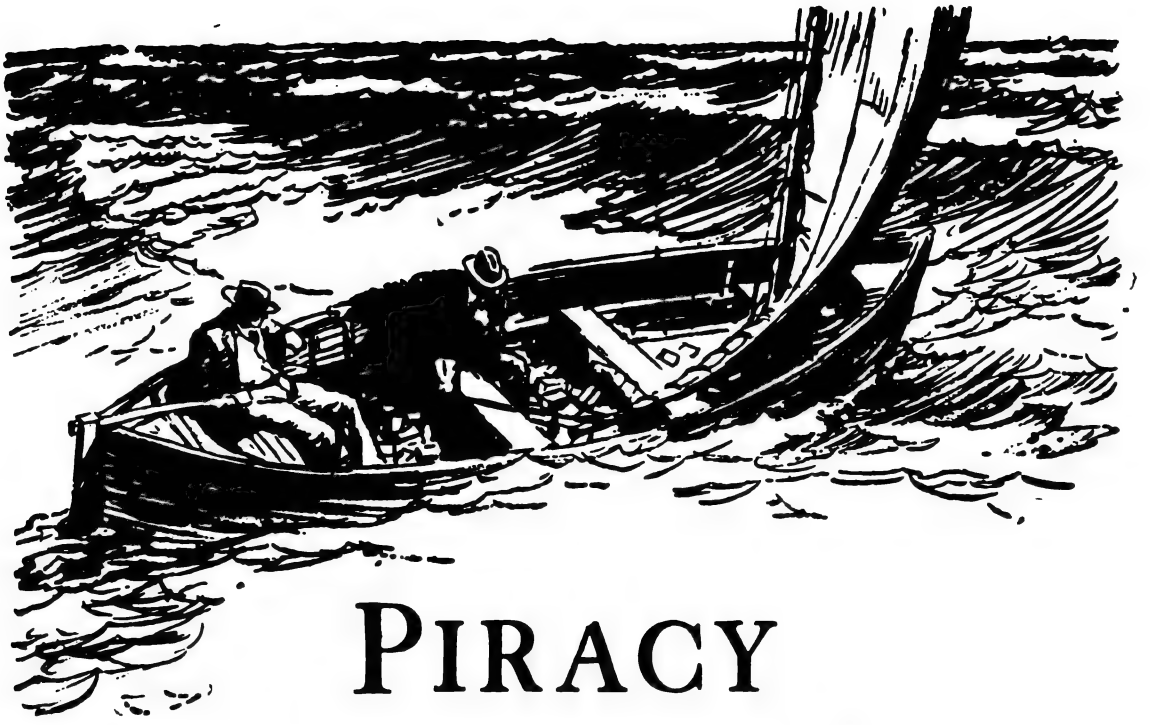
"My wife! My wife!"

Petts explained with few words. The tall man nodded and worked the boat to where the helpless woman was lying. As Clair was releasing the girl and while the Mackinaw was coming up the tall man explained to Petts:

"I'm John Gander. Messenger for vigilance committee at Helena. Been trailing Bandergon—the feller I shot out o' the trees. Sorry I couldn't 'a' taken him back alive. But he always was a stubborn cuss. Shot me up a spell ago. Thought he'd done for me. Now we're even."

"But how in tarnation did you git here from the south? Where'd you come from?" cried Petts.

"From General Alfred Sully's hunting camp, ten miles up the Yallerstone. Bandergon cut in there to throw the vigilantes off his trail. He just missed being caught at the camp by the high water. I trailed him across from the Missouri just in time to be caught. Luck was with me. I found this little bateau and follered. When the ice got too cantankerous I drew it up on a big cake. . . I'll have to have a writing from you folks so the boys in Helena will know just what happened to Bandergon. Makes me feel cheap I can't take him back alive. . . And if here ain't Major Pease, nat'ral as life 'n' twice as handsome!"



PIRACY

A Weird and Imaginative Story of the Sea

By CAPTAIN DINGLE

"WHEN steamers grew up to a speed of thirty knots, the last pirate gave up the ghost. We don't count piracy as a risk any more. Why, I carry down below at this moment three million dollars' worth of British gold for New York, and if there's a gun on board the *Ambrosia* I don't know where you'd find it. You're living in the past, Mr. Jetts. That business is dead."

The captain of the *Ambrosia* was relaxing. The pilot had been dropped several hours ago; the weather was fine; the big liner swished through smooth seas at nearly thirty knots, and the company in the lounge was agreeable. Dinner was over; and a poker game was in full swing in the smoking room. The lounge was decidedly more congenial. Mr. Jetts and his companion, Mr. Lime, had the best stateroom on the ship. Every detail of their appearance, manner, and speech marked them apart from the herd of ocean travelers. The captain sensed that at once. It was a relief to him, who was expected to be cordial to so many he despised.

Lime laughed softly. Lime was slender, dark, and of the type some women admire and many men detest. His lips were red, his fingers slim and nervous, immaculately kept. When he laughed, his teeth gleamed, and the sound was musical. But the eyes never twinkled, as they should with such a sound. They glittered, and were of a strange color which seemed to change with every degree of laughter, which was never merriment. There was some hint, in Mr. Lime's manner, of a deep-rooted dread which must be concealed by any sort of camouflage possible.

Jetts was of a different stamp. He rarely smiled openly enough to show his teeth. Rather his entire aspect was that of a man of the world accustomed to demand without limit and to get what is demanded. He was handsome as the devil, and pleasing. When he did smile, it was at something which called for a smile, and the eyes smiled with the rest of his face. He was sinewy as a wolf, and black hair covered the back of his hands. His eyebrows met. Lime laughed softly at the captain's declaration. Jetts simply tapped with his forefinger on the table, and nodded.

"You ought to know, captain," he said. "I have thought many times that these big steamers with their vast consignments of specie offer a tempting bait to bold men with brains. But as you say, thirty knots spelled the doom of the pirate."

A steward brought in a radiogram for the captain, who read it and remarked:

"Police warning of a forger who slipped through their fingers. Giving description. You see, even the radio is against any such attempt as piracy today. I happen to know that this forger is already caught. Received a wireless from another steamer where he was nabbed, so there's no harm in my telling you about this. But——"

"What's the matter, Lime? Not seasick already?" Jetts exclaimed, putting a hand on the shoulder of his friend. Lime was turning a greenish yellow. There was very little motion to the ship, but Lime's pallor was that of real sickness. He smiled, in sickly fashion, shaking his head.

"I'll be all right in a minute. It's those beastly cheroots you insisted on me trying. You know I don't smoke them, and besides, I'm only a fair weather sailor. Takes very little to turn me inside out. I'll take a stroll and come back later."

Jetts watched him go, with an expressionless face, and resumed where he had been interrupted:

"Fortunately speed has nothing to do with the recovery of sunken treasure. After all, taking gold from a wreck may be as profitable as robbing your strongroom, and no risk but that of weather."

"The one idea's almost as foolish as the other to a sailor," the captain chuckled. "I never heard any authentic report of fortunes made that way. Thinking of trying it, Mr. Jetts?"

Jetts drew deeply at his strong cigar, and let the smoke trickle slowly from both corners of his mouth until he was wreathed with a fragrant halo. His eyes peered through the haze, dreamily.

"That is what takes Lime and me to New York," he said.

"Seeking capital?" the captain smiled.

Jetts shook his head.

"We have capital. We have to go to New York to take a boat to the scene of operations, that's all. The treasure is in gold coin, and it's as good as banked. Other searchers failed because their appliances were faulty. We have something which will not prove faulty. Lime has invented a ray which will burn under water or above it. It cuts steel like cheese. If unshielded, it will burn up a mountain, or a—ship."

"Sounds like Aladdin's lamp, to me," the captain grunted. He regarded Jetts from under his half lowered lids as if suddenly discovering in his congenial passenger some trace of mental deficiency. Lime stopped in the doorway, looking less green and yellow, but not quite at ease. Jetts called him in.

"The captain thinks your ray is child's magic," Jetts said, incisively. "We'll convince him, eh? What do you say to a demonstration, Captain? Tomorrow morning, say. No trouble. Just have something, anything, old oil drums, sheet iron, wood, even bottles, piled up somewhere. Lime will melt 'em for you. You'd better have them put up on a platform or something, so the ship won't get scarred. It'll give the passengers a thrill. But I'd like to convince an old sailor. You may not believe in pirates any more, but when you laugh at recovering treasure you're trespassing up my street. How about it?"

"If you've got anything like that, I'd like to see it," the captain laughed. "Anyway, it'll amuse the passengers. Don't burn up my ship, though. Good night."

A radiogram was brought in as the captain rose to go, but this time it was for Jetts. He smiled when he read it, and passed it over to Lime.

"Luck is with us for a change," he remarked. "That stock we bought is soaring, Lime."

The captain was not interested in stocks he didn't own. He departed. And when they were alone, Jetts seized Lime savagely by the wrists and shook him like a rat. Lime's face was green again.

"Come outside! And hide that face! I'm sorry it had to be you to come along with me. But don't make any mistake. If I see things going wrong through your cowardice I'll— Hell! Come along aft, where we can talk, and get a grip on yourself."

At the taffrail they stopped. Nobody could overhear them there, for the foam of the wake was the only thing beyond. Jetts gripped his companion's lapel, and spoke soothingly to him.

"Everything's hunky. So pull yourself together. Kent is safe as houses. Aviation up to par, he says. You know what that means, decoded. At eight tomorrow morning he'll slip Brack, Todd, and Figg into the plane and start, unless we send him a wireless not to. Everything's O. K., this end. The captain took the bait like a shark. It's up to us now, and nothing can spoil the sport unless you get the creeps again." The smooth voice abruptly changed. There was venom in the whiplash tones. "If you fall down now, I'll squeeze the life out of you with these two hands! Get me?"

As abruptly as the venom crept in it oozed out, and Jetts thrust his arm into Lime's and led him to their stateroom, chatting lightly of the things of the world both knew so well.

NOT much is needed to pique the curiosity of well fed passengers on a fine weather steamship passage. The *Ambrosia* moved on the unruffled sea with scarcely a tremor and no other motion, and when breakfast was over, and people began to seek the sunny side of the deck for their chairs, some little stir attracted the keener ones forward, and the rest soon followed until the whole forward part of the passenger decks were crowded. In the bows of the big liner an officer directed the building of a rough board platform. On it were heaped odds and ends of steel, iron, and wooden rubbish. Lime puttered about at the after end of the forecastle deck with a black box, and Jetts helped him, though clearly it was Lime who was the understanding one of the pair. The affair they were setting up was unpretentious in size and appearance; but there was some amazing electric power stored or developed within it. Once, after Lime started something going, a buzz emanated from the box which could be heard from end to end of the big ship. And once, when Lime touched something else, a spear of intense light shot into the sunshine and made the sun seem dull. Lime was uneasy. That was clear. Jetts talked incessantly to him, but his voice only carried as far as it was meant to. Up on the bridge the captain stood with the watch officers and a few favored passengers. Very soon the men at the platform came away, the officer reporting all ready to Jetts as they passed. Then, with Lime kneeling by his black box, Jetts faced the passenger decks and called out to the captain on the bridge:

"Lime will show you a few tricks, ladies and gentlemen, which will demonstrate something of the possibilities of the ray he has invented. All we intend to do with it is to recover gold from a ship. But you will readily see that much more might be done on occasion. Turn it on, Lime."

Passengers who had decided the attraction was not worth bothering about, turned to seek other interests. Then Lime swung his apparatus forward, and a startled cry brought every man and woman back again to look. A steel oil drum, new, and of stout metal, suddenly vanished in a smell and a smear, leaving nothing but a charred plank to show where it had stood.

Even the captain gasped. The wireless operator emerged from his shack and handed the captain a radiogram, but the astounding disappearance of that steel drum held the stage. Jetts glanced often into the sternward heavens, and his eyes were keen. He looked for a longer moment when the radiogram was handed to the captain. Lime was so nervous that he swung the devilish ray, invisible now that he had it right, clear across the heap of material on the platform and the whole mass crackled and smoked and vanished, leaving the platform itself on fire.

"Now you've done it!" growled Jetts savagely. His eyes were strained upon a tiny speck high against the blue far astern. "Have to rush things now. For God's sake pull yourself together. I'll bet that radiogram the skipper just got tells him all about the navy plane being stolen. Swing the ray around, quick, and cripple the wireless aerial!"

Jetts faced the bridge. Lime shot his ray aloft, and the aerial wires snapped and melted. The wireless operator rushed from his shack pop-eyed. Many eyes stared aloft. The captain looked, and started to shout. Jetts stopped him with a hand upraised.

"Don't waste breath, Captain. Stand still, everybody, if you're satisfied about the ray. Lime, burn off the shelter at the end of the bridge." The heavy teak and plate glass weather screen, not twenty feet from the captain's hand, went in a puff. The speck in the sky was larger. The air was full of a dull note such as a million bees might make on a hot summer afternoon. Jetts wasted no more time. That was a plane, coming at two hundred miles an hour. He spoke again, and the ring in his voice matched the wolf leanness of him.

"I want your gold, Captain. Get it on deck. At first suspicion of trickery we shall sweep the ray the length of the ship. Don't misunderstand me. I give you fifteen minutes!"

Swift as a swooping vulture a great navy plane flashed to the sea and taxied, keeping pace with the fast liner. Everybody on board the *Ambrosia* knew that plane, though not one of them had ever seen it before. It was the latest creation in 'round the world flying machines. Capable of carrying forty men and ten tons of material besides its own weight, it had been scheduled to start off on a record non-stop flight that morning. Outside of the body, in cunning nests, two fast launches were carried, and as the plane took the water both were detached and towed close beside the floats. A begoggled man appeared on the deck between the wings, and another man uncovered something amidships which speedily materialized into another of Lime's infernal machines.

"Stop your ship, Captain," the goggled man shouted through a megaphone. "Jetts, hurry the stuff along!"

The captain had already resigned himself to the inevitable with a shrug and a mental resolve to fight another day. He was staggered by the sheer audacity of the coup. Not the ray alone, though that was deadly enough; but for men to actually steal the Navy's great mystery plane to rob his steamer of her gold constituted a piece of appalling efficiency before which he was helpless.

The great liner stopped. The plane sent her launches, and the steamer's own men lowered the gold into them. Several trips were necessary. Gold in millions weighs seriously. Once persuaded that they were not to be hurt or looted, the passengers found much of interest in the piracy. Jetts was right when he said it might give the passengers a thrill. Lime packed up his apparatus; but that other one on the plane maintained order very well indeed. Men among the passengers made bets that the plane could not rise with her five tons or so of gold. Some of them made a movement simply to look closer into the launches; and the watchful hand at the plane's ray swept a hole through one of the giant smokestacks. Then the captain himself ordered the passengers to stand motionless.

Jetts and Lime went into the launch with the last load. Lime trembled so that he fumbled, and dropped his precious ray box into the sea. Jetts gripped the man himself and prevented him following the apparatus. It took but ten minutes to stow the launches in their places; then the man at the ray waved to the steamer to proceed. The great plane started ahead, squattered and fussed under her burden for a half mile or so, then rose like an albatross and sped away at a speed which dwindled the great liner to mimic proportions in five minutes.

THE crew of the plane greeted Jetts and Lime jubilantly. Kent, who was in command of the plane, had all the earmarks of a service man gone wrong. He had the speech and the manners of a thoroughbred. So had Figg, who nursed the motors; and Brack, muscled like an athlete, who had lifted boxes of gold without an effort great enough to cut short his incessant cheery whistle; and so had Todd, the silent one, who carefully cleaned his finger nails with a sharpened match after any and every manual action. Take the crew one by one or as a whole, the six men might easily have been drafted straight out of an exclusive club, or an Army or Navy mess.

"Have any trouble?" Kent asked, having put the plane on a course and left it to the stabilizers and gyro pilot. Inside the roomy body the hum of the motors was scarcely heard. The rush of air at two hundred miles an hour only caressed the metal. Jetts was looking queerly at Lime, who still shook.

"No real trouble," said Jetts. "Lime got a dose of creeps and gave me a scare once. Got 'em again and lost his ray box leaving the ship. Haven't you got a drink to give him?"

"Not a thing," said Kent shortly. "This was one time when I kicked the tempter in the hip pockets. Make up for it when we lift the loot, though. Where'd we better land the boodle? There's a damned radio station on Corvo. You didn't tell me that. I'm sick of radio. I'll bet the whole world's buzzing about us. Almost got nicked getting away. Phe-e-ew!"

"Were you—did they—see, er, recognize you?" chattered Lime. His teeth were gleaming, and his lips, drawn back, were red as blood.

"They didn't see you, anyhow," snapped Jetts. "What the devil are you drooling about now?"

"I was the only one seen," said Kent, "and I was goggled. But we were late making the start because Figg found some new gadget he hadn't seen before, and had to play with it like an idiot before he started the motors. The field was crowded before we rose clear; and they got a gun on us. Missed, thank the God of mischance! But where shall we head for?"

"Weather's fine. How about the Formigas? Nothing there. The stuff's safe as in a bank dropped among the rocks. Handy to the islands, too, and a good place to lose the plane from."

"I don't see why we can't go straight to the coast and land with the stuff," put in Brack. "All this fuss seems unnecessary."

"Stick to the plan, laddie. Much better," said Todd, quietly.

"We'll make the Formigas in four hours. Only eight hundred miles," suggested Kent.

"Slow down, then. Fly high, old sport, and fly slow. Let's get close enough to make the rocks out clearly in daylight, then hold off until dark. I wish to the devil you'd got a shot of whisky to give this cold-footed inventor of a hot ray," said Jetts, and set himself the task of tranquilizing Lime's jangled nerves. There would be a stiff ordeal soon; and it would come in the night, on a silent sea, among weedy rocks that smelled like drowning.

The sea was level as a floor, and the skies blazed with stars when the giant plane at length zoomed with silenced motors out of the seaward blackness and came to rest, nosing the weedy rocks. No human life existed on the Formigas. The latter day pirates carried out their plan with apparent recklessness; but in reality, though they used powerful flashlights to light the landing of the loot, and though they made little effort to control their voices, Jetts and Kent had thoroughly scanned every fathom of the coast through prism binoculars during daylight from the upper air. And not only had they scanned the rocky Formigas; they had surveyed the near-by islands, and Black had jotted down a rough but clever sketch map. The landing of the gold was completed quickly, and a box opened, divided for immediate expenses. The rest of the boxes were carefully sunk between the boulders below tide level; then the plane was boarded again, the launches stowed, and the big motors started.

"Hit it up for four hours, and just before dawn we'll set her adrift," said Jetts. He was inclined to thaw from his usual rather grim attitude now that the loot was safely cached. He even joked in friendly style with Lime. And the plane droned along like a huge dragon fly towards the lonely African coast. So far into the detail of the plot had the six men delved, that each knew now precisely what was expected of him besides his share in the handling of the plane. Each secured his cash in a belt; and each carefully attired himself in rough, broken toggery that looked as if it had been worn through a very epic of disaster at sea. And as the coast came nearer, towards the lifting of the night, one of the launches was made ready. No provisions were put in the boat. But each man carried on his person a capacious canteen of water and a navy emergency ration.

"I'll stick with Lime," said Jetts, with a nod. "Better take it in couples, you fellows. We'll land far enough from anywhere to be safe from curiosity, but near enough to two or three towns to be secure against much discomfort. Nothing to add, have you, Kent?"

"Only to repeat a word of caution regarding lush," said Kent. "Wait three months, and you can all swim in lush for the rest of your days. Let it keep until then, boys."

"If you can, so can we all, Kent," grinned Brack. "Give me a quiet little flat in Paris and I'll never know I'm thirsty."

THERE was a quiet air of satisfaction about the six men when at last they brought the plane to the sea within half a mile of a lightless coast. They had made out the glow of a port's lights from aloft, and had nothing to fear once they landed. Brack stayed in the plane when the others boarded the launch. It was his job to perform the last bit of covering up of tracks which had been calculated to the ultimate degree of certainty.

"Keep a flash burning, low in the boat, and keep still until you see me let go," he called out cheerily, and spun the motors again.

The great plane rose, and circled towards the land, going out of sight swiftly. Lime crouched in the launch in shivering discomfort. The launch was small, and the sea so dark and lonely. Then the plane hummed out again, flying at a hundred feet level, and traveling at terrific speed. In scarcely a long breath she was over the boat again, and gone; but keen eyes saw Brack climb from the pilot seat, and plunge downwards, while the plane shot over the ocean, heading northwest under gyro pilot and stabilizer.

"Good old Brack! He made it! Look out for him, fellows."

The launch started ahead, the flashlights swept the sea. So prompt were the crew that the launch was among the bubbles from Brack's daring plunge before the sea had well subsided. But of Brack not a trace.

"He can't have hit anything!" gasped Figg foolishly. The flashlights darted everywhere. No Brack.

"Hell! Can he have gone under?" stammered Kent, who was his intimate. Lime jumped up in the boat, making it reel.

"God's curse! Brack now, who next?" he screamed.

Jetts gripped him fiercely, dragging him down.

"It's nasty, fellows, but we can't help it," Jetts said soberly. "He took the chance voluntarily, and blaming ourselves won't bring him back. Let's get ashore, quick."

In the first gray of a murky morning they landed on a rubble beach. Jetts himself tore out the water intake pipe, leaving the sea spurting in. Then the motor was started, the launch headed out to sea, and let go. She went half a mile, and sank in deep water. So far as any trace of the stolen plane was concerned, it could not be found on any of the men who speedily separated there on the African strand and began their respective dreary tramps to human habitations. Each man gave a hand to the others, and all briefly repeated the orders for reunion, three months from that date, at Madeira.

"Now let's see you act the man," Jetts jollied Lime as they struck off together. "The plane 'll be picked up somewhere in the northern steamer lanes. Nobody can ever connect us with the theft of that. And where it's found they'll look for the gold. In three months we'll be rolling in clover, old boy. So buck up."

"Brack isn't rolling in clover. Brack's dead," Lime muttered, shuddering as the pitiless sun came up. And he muttered all through a blazing day, and into a velvet evening when they tramped wearily into the port of Mogador. To save his sanity Jetts bought him liquor until he fell into a stupor. And he had him washed and dressed, and snug in a bunk aboard a homeward bound steamer before the stupor wore off.

TWO days after the date of reunion, which was three months after parting, Figg and Jetts, Kent and Todd and Lime sailed a paintless but stout old schooner out of Funchal harbor. It had been policy to avoid very close acquaintance in Madeira; but now that the blue sea danced all around them, and the day shone like an invitation to life itself, men permitted scraps of reminiscence to escape. Mostly it concerned the manner in which each had spent time and cash since they parted. But Jetts had taken on a grimmer air. He seemed as if he of all of them had scarcely enjoyed himself. And Lime, on the contrary, wore a foxy, alert expression as if he had been well taken care of and knew it, accepted it as his due, and did not care much what it had cost Jetts. They had found him well primed with wine in the hotel, and the wine filled him out, warmed his veins, made his red lips redder, and stiffened his sleazy backbone.

As for the rest, they seemed to be happy and content to carry out to the last detail the scheme which had so far proved so airtight. Jetts and Kent were primarily responsible for the plans. All the men in the plot were ex-service men of good rank, disgruntled at the failure of the cataclysmic war to unearth better conditions for anybody. There were brains in the gang.

It was Jetts who first saw the tremendous possibilities in combining ultra modern invention with age-old piratical urge. It was Lime who stole the vital principles of a famous death ray and made from them a sort of portable infernal machine capable of demolishing steel and stone. It was Figg, whose own inventions had been ridiculed by the Aviation Board, who conceived the idea of stealing the great plane which embodied most of his own ideas, right on the eve of a spectacular world jaunt. Kent had seen further than his companions and had put the hallmark of genius to Jetts' scheme. It was Kent who insisted that the gold be first hidden, instead of taking it straight to a spending place immediately after the piracy. And it was his idea that the most fitting climax to the ultra-modern coup of seaplane and deadly ray was to use the most decrepit old schooner procurable for the ultimate operation. Nobody would connect such a vessel with the daring pirates who stole millions in gold from a fast liner in broad daylight. In Madeira the schooner had been bought openly, and cleared at the custom house under yachting papers on an ostensible sporting trip to the Sargasso Sea. All the party had grown three months' beards. None had fears about identification. Even Lime seemed brave. Perhaps it was the wine.

And now that the end was in sight, Lime rather fancied himself for the important part he had played. The others smiled indulgently, knowing him. There were no reminders of past performances, though Todd had been at school with Lime, and remembered his record there. They knew that a machine gun might have served their turn as well as the deadly ray. At least, they believed that. Jetts and Kent were not so sure, since each had faced guns and knew the chances of avoiding lead in a great crowd. They knew, very well indeed, that the ray could never be avoided; so they were inclined to permit Lime to swell a bit so long as he did his share of the necessary work until they all parted, men of substance.

What everybody seemed to consider unnecessary now was the restraint in liquor. Even Jetts, who insisted on it, only did so because it was part of the preconcerted plan, and that plan, except for the unfortunate death of Brack, had worked out perfectly. There was liquor in the schooner. Plenty of it. But all had agreed that it should be broached only when the loot was safely landed and divided. The plan was to sail boldly into Long Island Sound, with the specie among the ballast, and anchor in one of the many small yachting harbors. So many similar old schooners, manned by similar crews of amateur sailors, were doing stunts of ocean cruising since the war. The Dry Navy might overhaul them, but at the worst could only discover the liquor. If they found that, they would scarcely search further since they would expect to find nothing else. It was the thought of losing the liquor like that which was the cause of a grumble starting as soon as the schooner left the island of Madeira a hundred miles astern.

"Broach it if you like after we pick up the stuff," Jetts suggested, impatiently. "Let's get that aboard anyway. Get it safely away and out into the open sea, I don't care much if you drink your heads off. I can look after the ship."

"Jetts is the great little guardian angel," said Lime, with a purring smile. Lime always seemed to be full of exaltation since leaving Madeira. He was not broaching the ship's liquor store. If he had a private stock he was hiding it well; and Jetts was unwilling to start a fuss at that stage.

"I don't care about guarding you fellows," said Jetts. "It's the boodle I care about. It only takes a stumble for a man to drop a box between rocks and boat. We need every box. Get the boxes under hatches, and you may all get pickled and stay pickled. One of you come and give me a hand with the big boat. We'll be up to the Formigas in about three days and need it. Nobody knows whether the damned thing'll float yet."

Amidships, on the schooner's flush deck, a big ship's lifeboat was stowed. The schooner had possessed no boat; and when the discarded lifeboat of a Cape liner chanced for sale, Kent was quick to grab it, even though there were better boats for the seeking.

"We'll need a big one. To hell with looks," he said, and he builded better than he knew.

But it had not been floated. The water boat brought it out to the anchorage, and lifted it aboard the schooner. Now Jetts and Kent went over it carefully. The gold would be heavy. It was not certain that weather conditions would be as fine as when the gold was landed. It might be necessary to load the boat beyond ordinary capacity, in order to get the loot into the schooner quickly. So the ribs and garboards were closely examined. The masts and sails thoroughly overhauled. And the thole-pins and oars. No matter what happened, this bit of piracy would go down in history as an accomplishment. No failure here because of neglected details.

"We'll fill it with water as it lays on deck," said Kent. "If it leaks more than just through drying up, we'll see where it comes out by morning. If it's only tightening up it wants, it'll get that before we need to use it. Don't you think we might have just one peg of whisky for luck, Jetts?"

Jetts knew Kent's weakness. But he shook his head.

"Not with my consent. If you want to displace me as leader, call the gang. I'm under the decree of the vote, you know that."

Kent did not call the gang. But when he and Lime took over the schooner at eight bells, both were much too happy for two men of such different temperament. Jetts saw it. He went to Lime's bunk and rummaged. He found nothing. But he knew that Lime was getting liquor somewhere; and that Kent had lately shared.

THERE was a mild ripple of excitement when the lonely Formigas hove in sight again. Far down towards Santa Maria a sail was seen in the last rays of evening sunlight. The schooner hove to until the sail went over the western sea rim. And in the blackness of night again the big boat was lowered from the schooner, leakless and comfortable looking to a timorous eye. A light anchor held the schooner, a hundred yards off shore, in a bight from which the light breeze would blow her clear when her manila cable was slashed. Before anchoring, the schooner had made a circle of the rocks; sometimes fishermen seek shellfish bait there. But there was nothing to fear. Well fed and expectant, with three months of security behind to give them cool pulses, four of the men took the boat to the rocks and loaded her. Lime was left on board, simply because he was physically less able than the others to handle such dead weights as mint boxes of gold coin.

While the boat was away, Lime held his nerves quiet with Island brandy, cunningly hidden beneath Jetts' own berth, behind Jetts' own gear. But the dancing light ashore, which told as if in words the progress of the landing, gave him the shivers. Not even when the boat bumped alongside, perilously overloaded but safe, with two men swimming to save weight and singing a jubilant song, did Lime feel happy. The night was enough to terrify him, the night and the moaning sea.

Jetts was one of the swimmers. He knew better than any of them how much depended on this transfer. One small movement to one side, dipping a gunwale, meant a deeper lurch, water pouring in, and the loss of boat, loot, everything. It was Jetts who swam, hand on gunwale, and stayed in the water until the other two men left the boat and hooked on the tackles. Then he clambered on board. It was not expected that the schooner's tackles could lift the boat with its load; or that the boat could support the load while lifted; Jetts knew the boat was safe if once the tackles were hooked and hauled taut. She could neither capsize or sink, even if she filled. But he determined that a plank should be added to that boat's gunwales all around as soon as they got to sea. They might need that boat again. A commander, was Jetts, leaving nothing to chance.

Daylight was creeping over the sea before the last box of looted coin was lifted on deck. Daylight near the Azores was not welcome. Far too many steamers, island schooners, fishermen.

Jetts and Figg lifted from the boat; Todd and Kent received the boxes from them, and Lime changed places in brief relief as wanted. It was Lime, changing places at the last with Todd, who dropped a box. It dropped but inches; was not even broken open; but it crushed Todd's hand to a pulp. It was the last box.

"It's nothing," growled Todd. "The box carries it's own medicine. I'll be able to steer, anyway."

Jetts saw Todd turn white. He broke out the first of the whisky, sluiced some over the crushed hand and bandaged it, and poured a half tumblerful down the man's throat. Todd steered. When the boat was hoisted aboard, and the schooner put on a course for the loneliest part of the Atlantic, Todd stood his wheel while the others labored among the shingle ballast with the golden hoard.

Then Jetts and Kent went to work on the boat. The others jeered, but the work went on without respite until finished.

"A foot more freeboard," said Jetts with satisfaction. "She'll carry us all now."

And when all work was done, when even tall Pico could be seen from the crosstrees, Kent shook his broad shoulders and delivered himself of an ultimatum:

"The sooner we get ashore now, the sooner we can be gentlemen again. Meanwhile, and to hell with old Jetts, let's fill up on good whisky, drink success to crime, and get a glow on. We've been too damned grim and gray. How about it, Lime? You know where the liquor is."

Lime grinned like a trapped fox. He was still shivery from the accident to Todd.

He had drunk brandy ever since; but it had not blurred his memory of that dull crunch of flesh and the dripping blood. He went to the store, and broke four bottles in opening a case of whisky. He was grinning, more like a fox than ever, when he carried an armful of bottles on deck.

THE Atlantic between the northern tracks of steamers and the Sargasso Sea is infrequently traversed. The schooner sailed for a week, and never a smudge of smoke fouled her horizons. Jetts held command by sheer weight of sobriety. He knew the whisky would not last long; that it was just as well to get it out of the way before nearing a coast or a steamer track. Lime had acquired a sort of courage. Bravado perhaps. That was whisky and brandy mixed. Todd's hand was in ugly shape; Jetts dressed it every day, but Todd drank as much as the rest, and his blood was not over clean anyhow. Jetts was afraid of that hand. Lime looked at it one morning before starting the day's drinking, and made some ribald comment upon Todd's ancestors' habits. Todd struck him in the mouth with the gruesome fist, and Lime ran in momentary panic to hide, dabbing frantically at the spots of dark blood on his face and breast.

When next Lime went on deck he was singing an old drinking song. Todd stood his trick at the wheel, white as a ghost, but game as a pebble, and accepted Lime's proffered drink with a wry smile.

The weather changed. The schooner was halfway across to the American coast. Steamers had crossed her horizon. Jetts and Kent navigated, and both had handled vessels in narrower seas. When a gale whistled down out of the southwest they knew where they were. But they didn't know how deceptive was the apparent stoutness of the schooner. She lay down to the blast, and the squealing and working of her timbers and spars was ominous. In twelve hours of laboring she made five feet of water. In the chilliest hour before a watery dawn, Jetts stopped the men at the pumps.

"We'll have to heave her to and get the boat over," he shouted. "When she's around, two of you jump below and sling the cases. Better get 'em on deck while we can."

The men, with the whisky cold inside them, cursed Jetts. They cursed the sea, and the ship, and each other. And Jetts, indifferent to all but the safety of the schooner and her freight, let them curse. He it was who got to the main-gaff downhaul when the mainsail got foul. It was Jetts who got down the jib. And when ready, it was Jetts who watched for the smooth on which to swing the schooner around to bow the sea. But Todd, his hand and arm useless now, was unequal to the task of meeting the roaring sea that sprang up out of nowhere and boarded the schooner when she lay in the trough.

When it passed, the upturned boat was all that was left on deck. Kent and Figg clung to the main rigging. Lime had fled below when he saw the sea coming. Jetts, watchful, gripped the mainsheet as the water poured over his head; and the instant his head emerged he sought to see the helm. Todd was not there. Todd's crippled hand had failed him. Somewhere in the gray murk astern Todd had gone to check up notes with Brack in that place where pirates good or bad must fetch up.

For two days the schooner labored. Pumps clanked day and night. But the water crept nearer to her deck, and there was a dead, sullen motion about her which seemed to say her time was up. Lime was terrified again. Jetts had locked up the rest of the liquor, and kept the key. Not even Kent's studied insults could win that key. And when the water ran over the cabin floor, the pump was out of commission, and the foremast was ready to go overboard, Jetts called all hands and they decided to abandon ship.

"As well now as later. I saw a steamer's smoke," chattered Lime.

Jetts stopped him savagely.

"A steamer's smoke means nothing to you, unless it's jail! We don't want to finish the voyage by steamer. But if we hang on here any longer that's about what we'll do. Get plenty of grub in the boat. Here's the stores key, Lime. That's about all you're fit for. We need stores, even if we have to leave gold behind."

"A long chance of leaving any behind!" growled Kent. "Lots of room for everything, now Todd's gone. What did we sweat that plank onto the boat for?"

Jetts swung the schooner off before the wind. The gale was slacking, and the schooner leaked less when running. Besides, she took water while hove-to, so loggy was she. Running before the wind, she took no water, and the men could work about the boat.

And the end came suddenly. All the gold was stowed in the boat, upright in the chocks on deck. The water sluiced through the scuppers beneath her. Already the hold was full to the beams. Lime threw in food. Kent staggered up with a case of whisky. Figg swung an ax at the main rigging. There would be no chance to lift and launch the boat. She was far too heavy now. And if the schooner sank beneath her, and she was caught in the rigging, all would go together. Jetts watched the seas like a gull. He felt the schooner wallow, barely able to rise above the seas that ran beneath her. He gave the word to get into the boat. They would wait for the schooner to sink under them. The mainmast stood, but the rigging hung up and down the mast. There would be no hindrance to the floating of the boat. Figg and Lime bundled in another case of whisky, and then the schooner took the plunge. Slowly, heavily, like a stricken monster, she stopped short in her running, the seas swept over her head, and the shock was sharp enough to jerk the boat partly free from the chocks. Once the boat bumped on the deck; then the schooner sank from under her, and the boat floated clear, barely six inches of gunwale showing above the licking seas.

THROUGH a night they floated, the seas subsiding. Lime whimpered, crouched in the bottom of the boat. Kent broke into a case and produced whisky, and Jetts made no objection. All were chilled. In the morning, when a dawn promised clearing skies, Figg volunteered to prepare breakfast. Jetts issued stores of preserved meat and biscuit; and Kent put together a small camp stove. Figg put coffee into the pot, and sought for the water.

There was no water. They glared at each other. Food there was, and whisky, but no water. Gold enough to buy lives; but no water to save them. Figg and Lime cursed each other for putting in that last case of whisky. Kent drank from a whisky bottle, and Jetts snatched away the bottle and hurled it into the sea.

"Whoever is responsible for this has murdered us!" snarled Jetts, and Kent, about to resent the taking of his whisky, seemed to suddenly realize what no water meant.

Nobody ate. Food gagged them. Kent helped Jetts throw overboard all the whisky but one quart, and that was stowed in the sternsheets locker under Jetts himself. And the breeze died. They day grew hot. The boat rode low and loggy, almost awash with her dead weight. What light airs there were, Jetts trimmed the boat's lug sails to, and he steered west. He knew how hopeless it all was. Still four hundred miles from the coast, there was no chance in the world to make it. If the breeze strengthened, the boat must sink. If it did not strengthen, the boat must wallow where she was, for there was neither room to row, nor power in the human force within to move her.

Kent sat silent and rigid in the bows. Twice during the day Jetts announced their only chance of life was to jettison the gold, man the oars, and steer for the steamer lanes. Twice he was cursed into silence. In the night a steamer's lights were seen, and Figg shouted towards her.

"You won't be heard at this distance," said Jetts. "If you say so, we'll dump the stuff and pull over that way."

They did not dump any gold. Men hold on tenaciously to the most worthless thing there is. And no more lights were seen. On the third day, Kent and Figg drank sea water while Jetts was sleeping. On the third night, while Lime steered the barely moving boat, Kent and Figg, half delirious, fought over the gold which Kent would have thrown overboard. The lurching of the boat awoke Jetts, and he saw the fight in the moonlight.

"Stop that!" he yelled, hoarsely. He pulled a revolver, and yelled again, for the struggling men dipped the boat's rail until the water poured in.

"Cut it out, or I'll shoot!" he barked. He did not shoot. The frenzied fighters lurched wildly, the boat rolled down, and they pitched into the sea. They never reappeared. Jetts sat gazing somberly where they had disappeared. Lime had stolen the whisky from the locker while Jetts slept, and drank greedily now. Jetts heard the gurgle, and saw the drinking, but made no protest. He regarded Lime intently for a while, then said with an effort:

"It was all your idea, Lime. You made it possible. Now we two are left. It's up to you. Shall we chuck out all this muck and take a chance to live, or shall we die like idiots, like those poor devils just gone?"

"We won't die!" grinned Lime, full of whisky. "It may rain tonight. Carry on, old fellow. Have guts."

Jetts sat and steered. There was a light air, blowing fair, but he knew, oh, how well, that neither he nor Lime could last three days more. And the coast was many times three days distant. Lime was on the verge of delirium. Jetts' tongue was dry and swollen. He had fancies, too. Queer that of all the gang Lime was the survivor. The weakling; the spineless one. And Lime was counseling carrying on. Of course, Lime was half crazy, but . . . .

It did not rain that night, nor the next day. When Jetts struggled out of a chaotic doze with the high sun full on his face, Lime was scattering loose gold with both hands, and jibbering in idiotic glee.

"We're going home. Jetts and me. Swell stateroom in a fine big ship. Hullo, Jetts! Woke up at last? Here's our ship. See?"

Then Jetts saw it. A great steamer had stopped beside the boat. A flashing white lifeboat was already almost alongside, and sailors were grinning at Lime's antics. The young officer steering the lifeboat wore a puzzled look as he saw the boxes on which Lime sat. But there was no puzzlement in Jetts' face. He knew that steamer. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered. He cackled dryly.

"They won't give you a stateroom, Lime! That's the *Ambrosia!* Better take this. I've done with it!"

Jetts' revolver shot rang out as the boats touched. The young officer seized the pistol from Jetts' dead hand, but Lime had no intention of using it. He grinned at the sailors, offering handfuls of gold from a broken box.

"Lots o' money. Live like a lord. Good old *Ambrosia*. I know her. Know the captain, too. Silly old fool. Said nobody could rob him of his gold. Not a bad old boy, though. Let's go see him. Look after my baggage, will you? Buy you a drink when we get on board."

"Thanks. But I'll take you to see the captain first, Mr.—Mr. Lime, isn't it? I thought I recognized you. And I know the captain will be glad to see you again. He often speaks of you."

CAPTAIN DINGLE *next turns back to the days of not so long ago, when sturdy whalermen dropped over the horizon on three year voyages across the world. "Sea Worthy," a long and gallant romance of the far oceans, appears in the September issue with a splendid first instalment.*

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

BUCKO SKIPPER

THE moon was full and high above, and the six barges slid down the mile-wide highway of the Hudson with a soft rippling of waters. On either side, the river banks were visible in silvered dimness through the translucent night. Aft in the cluster of ungainly vessels the powerful Deisels of the center barge thrust us ever south. We sat on the forward hatch of the first barge, my partner and I, and smoked our pipes and listened. He sat beside us, a stocky, tanned, gentle eyed man with strong, expressive hands and a voice that carried a soft drawl.

"I been at sea and I walked a plow, but this here's a better job than any of them if you don't mind one or two things. The old-timers, living on their barges with families and all, they're called skippers. We're just hands, I guess, but we move faster on steel bottoms, get somewhere, and there ain't hardly any work to bother. Depends a lot on the captain.

"Our boss, now, he's skipper of the power barge aft there. He's a Scandinavian with a master's ticket on any ocean. He may be at home on salt water, but he's a hell of a ways from there on the Erie Canal. He must have been brought up on sail and long voyages, 'cause he's got a bucko way with him that just don't work out with river folk. I kept my mouth shut and done my job, but a couple of these lads ain't used to hell roarin' sea discipline. It ain't noways necessary anyway in this business. They sassed him back, and got knocked cold. Two of them. I seen it, and I tell you the place he learned his stuff they teach 'em thorough. They taught him plenty.

"He don't know everything, just the same. Back in Lock Fifteen at Fort Plain he tried to go bustin' through in a hurry. The second tries to show him how we takes a string of loaded barges through a lock, but nothing doing. Ain't he been to sea, and don't he know more than any fresh water, barge hand? He shoves 'em into the lock like pool balls into a table pocket—slam bang! And one of them cracks open and sinks in the lock. And being loaded with pig iron, believe me when she sinks—she sinks!

"It was after that he lost his temper and sailed into those two fellers. . . .

"When we get to the Erie Basin in Brooklyn tomorrow, the crew is drawing their time and quitting. It ain't none of my business especially, but I know that four of them is going to wait for the skipper tomorrow night ashore and work off their grudge. Officially, I ain't going to be anywhere within miles of the place, but I aim to see that scrap. The engineer is offering two to three on the skipper. And while four guys is a tough handful for any man, there ain't no takers for that bet. That squarehead carries a punch like a triphammer, and he don't spare it any when called upon to deliver."

Aft, visible in the moonlight, the broad shoulders of the skipper loomed above the wheel. I had observed him, a taciturn Viking of a man, secretly worried and openly arrogant, a curious combination of skilled assurance and bafflement at the problems of his new service. His eyes could not so quickly adjust themselves to the sight of green land close on either side after staring at rolling, empty horizons for many years.

My new friend invited me to attend the coming battle from a discreet street corner in the Brooklyn water front. But ahead were the lights of the city, and a locomotive wailed nervously as it sped over Spuyten Duyvil bridge. We had clambered aboard in midstream at Albany, and this was our destination. The canoe was dropped overside and loaded with duffle. My partner and I stepped gingerly into place, and shoved away with wide double paddles glistening wetly in the moonlight. We were home from two long and lazy months on the waterways of the East.

"Well," came the voice of our loquacious friend, "safe home! Be looking for you next year."

The string of barges pushed sturdily on through the night. For a long time we could see the immobile breadth of those shoulders on the tiny bridge of the power barge, facing south, headed for Greenpoint and the Erie Basin, arrogant and indomitable.

We were sorry that fortune never permitted us to witness that fight. Two to three on the Swede, and no takers! It must have been one whale of a scrap.

WHERE MEN ARE MEN

THE following news item, perhaps, has little point. But it is interesting in the light of that ubiquitous problem, the Western story. I have taken it from the highly respected columns of the New York *World* and credit it with all the veracity thereby implied.

And what I want to know is: what self-respecting author of Western fiction would ever dare to place his hero in the predicament which this boisterous Mexican ranch hand deliberately sought out, found and licked to a frazzle?

> MATAMORAS, Mexico—With no onlookers, one of the most sensational and bloody battles between man, beast and reptile that ever took place in this lower part of the Rio Grande border region was staged when Pablo Sanchez, an employee of W. A. King of Brownsville, just across the border in Texas, took into his head the notion that numerous wildcats, rattlesnakes and parrots, which King had accumulated here for shipment to customers in various parts of the United States, were worthy of his valor as antagonists.
>
> Sanchez had imbibed freely of mescal and his bravery needed satisfaction of some sort. Armed with a stout club he entered the room where the assembled animals, snakes and birds were in cages and boxes. He deliberately opened the doors of the containers, the first to jump out in search of freedom being a half-dozen ferocious wildcats which were only recently captured in a remote part of Mexico. Sanchez paid no attention to the animals, but proceeded to dump the collection of 100 or so rattlesnakes upon the bare floor. He then turned loose a large number of parrots.
>
> The stage being set for the fight, Sanchez ploughed into the screeching, rattling collection of animals, reptiles and birds. The wildcats attacked him singly and en masse but he met them with blows of his club. The rattlesnakes strewed themselves over the floor and between the blows which he showered upon the wildcats, Sanchez mauled the life out of the snakes as they coiled preparatory to strike him with their poisonous fangs. Parrots flew back and forth in evident terror.
>
> The battle lasted more than thirty minutes, at the end of which time the noise attracted the attention of local police, who came to the rescue, dragging Sanchez from the room in the face of danger to themselves. The casualties were many, but the intrepid Mexican came through the battle practically unharmed.

A ROVER REPORTS

VERY modestly indeed, BASSET MORGAN tells us a word about himself in the following. *A Thief of Tinian Time,* in these pages, is his initial contribution to EVERYBODY'S. It is a charming tale, and I hope we may have many more like it.

Basset Morgan was born in Chatham, Ontario, with a heritage of wanderlust from Cornish seagoing ancestors that found outlet, from infancy, in small sailing skiffs, canoes and escape from drowning. Schools were always unendurable. The call of the wild was answered early in youth by a joyous adventurer with blanket roll and gun.

Traplines of the snow countries, campfires of the North shared by rollicking hunters were incidents of a trail which led to North Pacific shores and untracked British Columbia wildernesses, where the sea lure beckoned a sun track out and far to mysterious and fascinating South Sea Islands. The cable ship work proved a treasure mine, and life was a joke until educational necessities of a family acquired en route made settling down imperative. Then, the high cost of keeping still and growing up with the youngsters agitated the memories accumulated so casually and they clamored for retelling. After working harder than ever in life, the magazines taught what adventure had not, that good stories take a stiffer grind than bucking sea and land storms. Also, that editors are as big hearted and ready to help as comrades of sea and land trails.

LEADVILLE, 1878

THE best antidote I know for that Monday morning feeling is a letter from H. A. Wells out in Denver. I have twice persuaded him to appear with us in the *Meeting Place,* and now I pass along another of his cheerful letters. It is fifty years since he first joined the stampede to Leadville, and his life since has been varied and colorful and rich with experience. He was part of an historic era, mellowed and made glamorous by the passing years, to which we of another day render the tribute of abiding interest and a certain wistful envy.

He says, graciously:

> Of course I don't care if you quote from my letter if there was anything worth quoting. If you do I will show it to my wife. Maybe she'll think I have got some sense if she reads something I have said printed in a book.
>
> I have lost the typewriter because my daughter said I bent all the keys. I don't see what she is kicking about for she has got three more in her office and I bought them in the first place. I used to be pretty good with a pen for when I went to Leadville in 1878 the miners found out I could write and I got two bucks apiece for writing letters back to their folks. It worked fine until I got the letters mixed (I used to read the answers) for some were to wives and others were to sweethearts. I used to copy two love letters I found in a book—*The Art of Letter Writing.* If you want I will tell you about that and how I almost got shot over it but got married over it after all.
>
> Some people might think there is not much difference, but they get the wrong sort of wives to begin with.
>
> Very truly yours,
> *H. A. Wells.*

A NEW WRITER OF HUMOR

ONE day a manuscript came to my desk accompanied by a delighted reader's report. It was from an author whose name was unfamiliar. I read it, and accepted the tale joyfully. It was *Plug Hat* and you will find it in this issue.

The author says of himself:

> When I edge into the *Meeting Place* I feel that the best thing I can do is to indulge in a large quantity of silence. Nothing ever happened to me—much. However: I'm Nordic and red-headed; beyond that, the only disability to which I confess is a college degree. But since I'm now twenty-six, and very much through college, I'll probably survive that. College isn't dangerous anyway, except for those who take it seriously.
>
> To start out with, I was born. That wasn't very exciting, though. I was there, that was about all. And while going to grade school, I had no other adventures but one perpetual fight with those who didn't like the color of my hair. Since that I've spent my summers working and wandering about.
>
> Once I slept for a week in Henry Ford's Rouge Park. It's a very nice park. Washed dishes in a "cheap and dirty" restaurant two blocks from the water front in New York City. Shaved in Lake Michigan. Got off the road in Montana one night, and had to cross the same river three times—without a bridge. It's a very wet river. Loafed around, played poker and threshed in North Dakota and Alberta.
>
> And right now I'm fixing up my young Ford—going on nine years old—for another trip. Southwest this time, to Salt Lake City, Grand Cañon, Tia Juana, and so on. I do the driving, while a friend is chief cook. He puts the can of beans on the exhaust pipe, turns it at discreet intervals, and at the end of ten miles the dinner is hot. Then, since we have no can opener, I have to get out the hammer and screw driver in order to get at the beans.
>
> Some day I'll rise up and, with your permission, give the *Meeting Place* a lecture on auto-hoboing. It's the only thing I know anything about except farming and school. School is for kids, which rules that out; and all the farmers are busted, so nobody wants to hear about them.
>
> I should mention that Scroggins in *Plug Hat* is a friend of mine; and the railroad right-of-way he talks about is not far from my home up in the northwestern corner of Minnesota. A lot of other things happened to him too, and I'll tell about them if you're interested in him.
>
> *Albert Stengelsen.*

OVER THE EDITOR'S DESK

THE coming EVERYBODY'S for September has a line-up of stories certainly exciting to behold. It is without any question an all star issue. CAPTAIN DINGLE'S new serial, under way for months and especially written for EVERYBODY'S, is the headliner. It opens with a long instalment, the first of four, and will carry you far into a splendid, thrilling yarn of the sea. Out of New England, around the Horn, into the warm trades of the South Seas, through typhoon and mutiny—*Sea Worthy,* let me tell you, is one, swell story . . . The feature novelette is an unusually long Western tale by RAYMOND S. SPEARS. It bears a rather lurid title, *The Killers of Blizzard Basin,* and while it is full of dramatic action, I think I need not reassure you that this is no "conventional" Western. Spears is never hackneyed, and this convincing story is one of the best he's ever done . . .

R. W. Alexander, a young writer we first met in the June issue, appears again with a novelette of sea and jungle, *Black River*. Alexander, almost better than anyone I know, catches the hungering spirit of the world wanderer in his yarns, and endows them with a rare glamour . . . There are other fine stories by **Murray Leinster**, **Henry LaCossitt**, **Millard Ward**, **Elwood F. Pierce**, **Evan Anglesea**, **Frederick Niven**, **William Merriam Rouse**, and the end of the circus serial by **Thomson Burtis**. . . . How's that for a vigorous, lusty young magazine? It's one that we're all keenly proud to send into the world!

LADIES OF THE FRONTIER

HERE is an interesting letter. You will remember that there has already been some discussion in the *Meeting Place* on the subject of women in the Old West. **Ira D. Mullinax**, author of *The Feud at Sandy Ford* in the June issue, had a rare opportunity, as a newspaper man, to observe this phase of frontier life. He says:

> . . . But what I started to write about was your comment on the ladies and Raymond Spears' *The Border Line* in your April issue. I quite agree with your statement that "any tale which attempts a realistic picture of the roaring places on whatever frontier would have to go pretty far before it overemphasized the woman element."
>
> At Fort Smith there was Pearl Starr, daughter of the noted Belle and, according to tradition, of Cole Younger. Her resort was frequented by cowpunchers, outlaws, all sorts of colorful characters from Indian Territory. There was Mme. Paisley, at Kingfisher, who knew enough makers of Western history to fill two big books. She had a broken nose. Used to do an iron jaw stunt of sliding down a rope on a pulley in Barnum's circus. One day her husband got sore and set a wheelbarrow in her path. The broken nose resulted.
>
> As a newspaper man it has fallen to my lot to know a considerable number of these ladies of the evening. What rich, inside stories they can tell—of crime, of politics, of every sort of intrigue. A flock of cowboys and cattlemen could always be found in their places right after the burlesque show, in the old days. It seems to me these women have been sadly neglected by writers of Western fiction, which is strangely lacking in sex interest. The fiction cowboy is perhaps the most virtuous and holy he-man ever portrayed. I never knew any who were exactly that. It seems to me James Stevens deals pretty fairly with the punchers and their attitude toward certain ladies in *The Cowboys' Women*, in February *Plain Talk*. Writers of Western stuff have given the good women their due and perhaps a little more. Some day somebody is going to do some full length portraits, "warts and all," of the other kind, of cowboy revelry in their resorts. I've never seen a short story or novel that did just what I have in mind. I believe such fiction would bring forth loud roars and consequently success, at least as measured by sales. Don't you? (I do not mean appeal based chiefly on salacity.)
>
> Sometime, perhaps, I'll write you about some Western fiction material which has never been touched. I'm hoping for a chance to make use of it myself, before so very long.
>
> *Ira D. Mullinax.*

THE EVOLUTION OF AN EDITOR

WHEN I first broke into the editorial business, no neophyte ever venerated the sacred tenets of his calling more than I. There were certain immutable standards, I believed, by which the quality of fiction could be measured. A story was built thus and so, even as a cathedral reared skyward its precise and lovely pinnacles of stone, all in obedience to laws which bided no transgression. It was a meet and proper belief for a youngster.

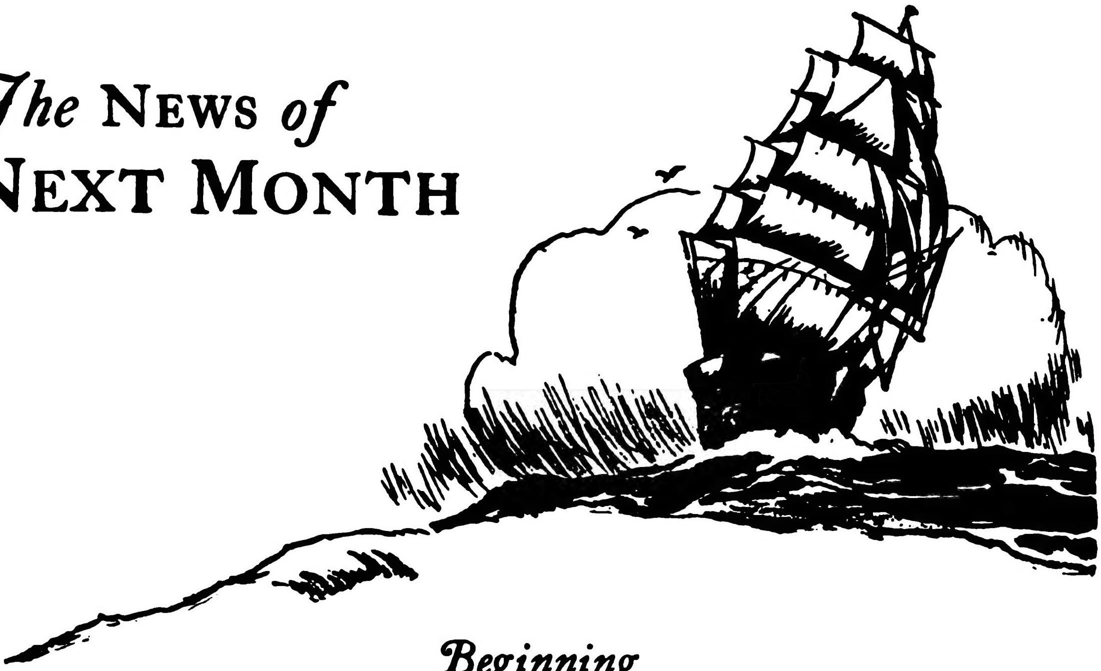
Time passed, and the fabric of my editorial credo became complete. It embraced everything and served me well. And then, unaccountably, it began to fray and wear thin. I was dismayed to discover that an author, inquiring the exact reason for his story's failure, could not be set to rights by quoting rule of thumb; that a reader, writing in to praise a magazine, might very well select for his highest encomiums a tale that violated the laws of fiction wholesale; and that another reader, perhaps one even less regardful of the conventions, might disagree with everything his predecessor said. The credo went bust. I threw the wreck out the window.

Occasionally I miss it now, for it provided a convenient alibi when there was need for one. But by and large, its absence has only lightened my labors. You will find, now and then, a story in this magazine which may startle you with a situation or a slant entirely new. Plot may be lacking, there may be no hero, but it will move you. One such is in this issue. You will recognize it. By all the rules it should still be in the limbo of the unread. It appears here because it is—a Story!

Come to think of it, what could be a better rule than that?

William Corcoran

The NEWS *of* NEXT MONTH



Beginning

SEA WORTHY

By CAPTAIN DINGLE

Remember the magnificent sweep and drama of Dingle's last serial, "Flying Kestrel"? Here is another great novel of the sea, a tale of doughty New England whaler men on Southern oceans; and, more particularly, the story of young Dick Edwards, who came into the heritage of manhood on the decks of the white winged *Cuttyhunk*.

* * *

THE KILLERS OF BLIZZARD BASIN

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

A long and powerful novelette of the western uplands and the desperate men who prey on lonely herds.

* * *

BLACK RIVER

By R. W. ALEXANDER

A thrilling novelette of the race for a treasure ship that lay buried in the tangled heart of a tropic jungle.

* * *

And seven splendid short stories, among them "Sadmush", by MILLARD WARD,—a humorous yarn of mariners in port; "Payung", by MURRAY LEINSTER, who gives us another fine tale of Malaya; "The Partners", by HENRY LACOSSITT, being the further adventures of Buck and Red; and "Guinea Gold", by EVAN ANGLESEA, a tale of the Dutch New Guinea jungle. And a final instalment of THOMSON BURTIS' thrilling serial of circus mystery.